COMPLACENCY AND MOTIVATIONAL VICE

by

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Abstract

What does it mean to be complacent with respect to especially complex ecological and social problems such as global climate change? Although those who are engaged on such problems tend to recognize complacency as a serious worry, we will not find much assistance from philosophers in understanding this concept. Thus, in this dissertation I set myself the task of developing an account of complacency that is adequate to contexts of deeply entrenched social and environmental injustice. My aims are to understand better what it means to be complacent, and to figure out what is involved in remedying this form of "motivational inertia."

In Chapter 2, I situate my proposed account in the context of an ongoing methodological debate among political philosophers. I explain why the methodological prioritization of "ideal theory" is a dangerously misguided approach to theorizing about matters of justice, and argue for the promise of a naturalized approach to nonideal theory. In Chapter 3, I develop an account of the epistemic dimensions of complacency by considering what it means for white people to be complacent with respect to the mass incarceration of people of color in such countries as the United States. I draw upon critical character theory to support my contention that complacency is a multidimensional form of character damage. In Chapter 4, I discuss further what it means to be complacent, this time in the broader context of global climate change. Having argued that complacency is a multidimensional form of character damage, in this chapter I proceed to examine how such damage is embodied intrapsychically in the form of settled expectations of self-sufficiency. Finally, in Chapter 5, I consider what is involved in remedying complacency. I discuss the relationships between repairing character damage and working for broader structural change, exploring some of the ways in which personal transformation is bound up with building culture and community for sustainable, long-term engagement.

Though I do not purport to be offering any recipes for remedying complacency, this project has been born of five-odd years of trying to learn enough from philosophy to change it for the better.

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The Department of Philosophy at Dalhousie has built a wonderful community of thinkers who truly care about and provide excellent guidance to developing students. I will look to

1. Introduction

> DISTURB US, Adonai, ruffle us from our complacency; Make us dissatisfied. Dissatisfied with the peace of ignorance, the quietude which arises from a shunning of the horror, the defeat, the bitterness and the poverty, physical and spiritual, of humans.
>
> Shock us, Adonai, deny to us the false Shabbat which gives us the delusions of satisfaction amid a world of war and hatred;
>
> Wake us, O God, and shake us from the sweet and sad poignancies rendered by half forgotten melodies and rubric prayers of yesteryears;
>
> Make us know that the border of the sanctuary is not the border of living and the walls of Your temples are not shelters from the winds of truth, justice and reality.
>
> Disturb us, O God, and vex us; let not Your Shabbat be a day of torpor and slumber; let it be a time to be stirred and spurred to action.
>
> - World Union Shabbat Evening Service

About this Project

Complacency and Motivational Vice grew out of efforts to find ways to make philosophy meaningful and relevant to people who are confronted with far bigger, more complex, and unimaginably saddening problems. Although it is, in many ways, an expression of profound grief and disappointment, I hope readers will agree that these pained feelings have been wound constructively, even tenderly, round fierce, indefatigable hopes and unrelenting trust in the wisdom of love.

This project weaves together a number of different ways of thinking and theorizing that do not always work comfortably together. Over the past several years my impatience with mainstream political theory and philosophy has fuelled a growing interest in the theory and practice of social movements and in the first-hand accounts of those who are living

through, most seriously harmed by, and actively resisting the ongoing domination of lands and of peoples under the normative influence of powerful nation-states (e.g., the United States, China, and Russia), international regulatory bodies (e.g., the World Bank, WTO, IMF, and UN), neoliberal macro- and micro-economic policies, financial institutions, and multinational corporations. My relationship with philosophy has changed dramatically in the process. I still think of myself as a philosopher, though, even if I do not always explain precisely how, and rarely on terms set out in advance.

The argument of this project is fairly straightforward. I am interested in figuring out what it means to be complacent with respect to especially complex ecological and social problems such as global climate change, where inaction has been the dominant response and there is very little that an individual person can do to prevent catastrophe on their own. I take it that most would agree that complacency is some sort of flaw or defect of an agent's character. Many would also agree that complacency is the defect of somehow failing to do one's part to deal with a pressing and urgent problem, presumably because one is ignorant of its nature and severity, does not care very much about it or its consequences, or is just satisfied with the way things are, with the way one is, or with the effort one has already put in. As several philosophers have pointed out, common usage of the term "complacency" suggests that the phenomenon at issue is not just any old flaw or defect, but a *vice* of individuals, and more specifically, an *epistemic vice*—perhaps a "vice of inattention" (see Kawall 2006). Thus, such usage encourages us to believe that an individual must be solely and wholly responsible for "lapsing into" complacency with respect to a particular problem, and that what gives rise to a lapse of this kind is a culpable failure to attend to and responsibly form beliefs concerning the nature of the

problem in question, as well as how one should be dealing with that problem. Think here of catchy poster slogans that appear to trade on and invoke this understanding of complacency. One that often comes to mind is: "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention."

Although I leave open the question of whether common usage of the term "complacency" may not be appropriate in certain contexts, I am concerned that when it comes to contexts of deeply entrenched social and environmental injustice such usage can only lead to misdiagnoses of complacency, while also suggesting misleading etiologies and inappropriate remedies, if not flatly counterproductive ones. Thus, I deny that "complacent" should always be taken to mean "(willfully, irresponsibly) ignorant of x," or "cares not (at all, very much, enough) about x." Nor should it always be taken to mean, "satisfied with the world (society, community) as it is," let alone "satisfied with oneself and one's efforts," although those who are complacent do tend to "rest content" with doing very little. Rather than there being a single phenomenon of complacency that always comes about in the same way and takes the same form in every instance, there is a family resemblance among a number of related forms of inaction, each of which is plausibly considered a "vice" and referred to as an instance of "complacency." My proposal is that complacency with respect to especially complex ecological and social problems is best regarded not as a vice of individuals—a function or result of life choices for which an individual is entirely responsible—or, on the opposite end of the spectrum, as a collective vice for which individuals bear little or no responsibility. Rather, complacency is best regarded as a *relational vice* of the sort that is fostered and sustained by specific interpersonal dynamics and structural economic and political processes, and it

is not the sort of vice that an individual can simply "overcome" on their own initiative. As the epigraph to this introduction suggests, agents urgently need to be "shaken out of" their complacency with respect to complex ecological and social problems—indeed, I suspect that it is in their own deepest interests to undergo the most thoroughgoing of shakings. Thus, I propose to reimagine what it means to be complacent in light of the unprecedented complexity of the ecological and social problems currently confronting societies worldwide. I contend that such a reimagining is necessary for the sake of more accurately describing a particularly recalcitrant form of inaction, for offering a more plausible account of how inaction of this kind is produced, maintained, and enforced, and for working more sensitively and effectively on devising and implementing remedies in the process of working to deal with the broader problems at issue. Although there are plenty of good pragmatic reasons for undertaking such a reimagining, it is my belief that the usefulness of a concept such as complacency is a function of its fidelity to the phenomenon in question. Thus, I agree with the thoughtfully chosen words of Naomi Scheman: "One doesn't choose here between explaining the world and changing it; rather one explains (and perhaps facilitates) the changes by changing the explanations" (Scheman 1980, 186).

To be clear, on my alternative account complacency still qualifies as a "vice" of sorts. However, I agree with Robin Dillon that the concept of vice itself needs to be reinvented in light of the relational dynamics and structural processes that foster, sustain, and enforce various forms of motivational inertia, including apathy, indifference, resignation, and despair. In other words, I am claiming that complacency and other relational vices are personal defects of the sort that individuals are partially, but not entirely, responsible

for acquiring. Nonetheless, I argue that individuals need to take responsibility for their complacency going forward, and that those who are in the grip of this vice urgently need to be "shaken out of" it, for it is not the sort that can be "overcome" through sheer determination and strength and will. Here it may be helpful to keep in mind that the mere fact that I need to be shaken out of something does not entail that it must all have been my doing, and hence my fault entirely. Think here of the need to wake a friend from a very bad dream. Your friend is not and never was fully in control of what has taken hold of her dreaming mind, and yet she is visibly upset and may well end up disturbing and even harming others if she keeps on yelling and thrashing around as she has been. Similarly, should appropriate remedies for complacency not be pursued for a critical number, the problems towards which people exhibit this particular form of motivational inertia—and several others besides, to be sure—will only continue to recur, become more deeply entrenched, increase in severity, or inch closer to irreversibility, irreparabability, or insolubility, as the case may be.

If to be in the grips of complacency implies that one has failed or is now failing in some way, then what sort of failure, or failures, is at issue? Contrary to what the recent work of certain virtue ethicists and even some critical philosophers of race might suggest, I argue that complacency is by no means simply an *epistemic vice*, nor is it a straightforwardly *moral vice*. My proposal is that complacency is best understood as a multidimensional form of *normative comfort* that has epistemic, socio-political, and moral dimensions, and is a manifestation of the *damage* inflicted on the characters of people inhabiting multiple, interlocking systems of domination and oppression—especially those who are mostly enabled by and benefit from those systems. I contend that complacency with respect to

such tremendous injustices as the mass incarceration of people of color and the mass extinctions resulting from climate change is a *political* failing for which agents are called upon to take responsibility, even under circumstances where it is not clear what they should be doing, let alone what would count as "doing enough." I argue that to be complacent with respect to problems of this magnitude and complexity is to be caught up in patterns of behavior that express *settled expectations of self-sufficiency*, regardless of how one is feeling about oneself or the world, or what in particular one happens to believe. Drawing on Sue Campbell's efforts to flesh out an expressivist and externalist account of the mental, and extending her approach to the domain of specific structures or traits of character, I suggest that complacency is not simply a matter of what is "inside" the individual, for it is partly constituted through its expression and is identified through the interpretation of behavior, by others as well as ourselves. Furthermore, complacency is only ever developed, shaped, evaluated, and remedied in and through our ongoing relationships with others—both personal and impersonal, chosen no less than unchosen. Its psychological elements can only be identified as they are expressed through our gestures and utterances, however unwittingly and unintentionally, and its production and maintenance must ultimately be understood within the context of the shaping of interpersonal interaction through social norms and the broader political economic context.

In Chapter 2, "Complacency in Nonideal Circumstances," I situate my efforts to provide an account of complacency with respect to an important and ongoing methodological debate among political theorists and philosophers. Because there has been a great deal of confusion in recent scholarly literature over what is called "nonideal theory," I set myself

the task of clarifying my usage of this term with a view to preemptively avoiding any confusion that might arise in later chapters. The main point of so doing is to be as clear as possible on where I stand with respect to a major methodological divide among political theorists and philosophers—a divide that may have important implications for the theories of social and environmental justice we end up producing, as well as for the policies, practices, and courses of action those theories encourage us to recommend or support. The bulk of this chapter is devoted to explaining why I have come to believe that the methodological prioritization of "ideal theory" is a dangerously misguided approach to theorizing about social and environmental justice, and then to presenting a "naturalized" approach to nonideal theory as the most promising of available alternatives. I offer a brief overview of how John Rawls originally drew the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory in his landmark work, *A Theory of Justice,* before going on to chart out the diverse objections that have been raised to the methodological prioritization of ideal theory. I then sketch out the aims, central tasks, and methodology of naturalized nonideal theory. In light of the aforementioned objections, I argue that naturalized nonideal theory is the most promising approach to theorizing matters of social and environmental injustice. Finally, I explain what developing an account of complacency aims to contribute to this broader field of inquiry, setting the stage for the more contextualized discussions to come in the third and fourth chapters.

In Chapter 3, "Epistemologies of Ignorance and Complacency," I develop an account of the epistemic dimensions of complacency by considering what it means for white people to be complacent with respect to racial oppression in the context of the mass incarceration of people of color, especially young black and brown men. In doing so I bring recent

efforts to apply lessons from an epistemology of ignorance to the issues of race, racism, and white privilege into conversation with an emerging field of inquiry known as "critical character theory," while drawing upon and engaging critically with Michele Alexander's analysis of mass incarceration in *The New Jim Crow*. I consider the question of whether and to what extent complacency with respect to racial oppression might be constituted by certain forms of ignorance—particularly, what Charles Mills refers to as "white ignorance"—and the related question of whether complacency is, or is in part, an epistemic vice. I argue that Mills' analysis of white ignorance is invaluable when it comes to understanding the epistemic dimensions of complacency. However, I also explain how examining the phenomenon of complacency through the lens of critical character theory could help to further advance discussion of the persistence of racism and racial oppression by foregrounding what we cannot see when we are focusing solely or primarily on white ignorance. Whereas processes of undoing white ignorance are crucial when it comes to upsetting certain modes of what I call *epistemic comfort*, I propose that complacency is best understood as a multidimensional form of normative comfort, which is a form of character damage inculcated among whites under the circumstances of mass incarceration. Ultimately, in this third chapter I hope to show that theorists and philosophers who are working on the epistemology of ignorance and critical character theory have mutually informing insights to contribute to broader efforts aimed at reducing and ultimately ending racial oppression, as well as other interlocking forms of structural, group-based oppression.

In Chapter 4, "Climate Change and Complacency," I discuss further what it means to be complacent with respect to complex ecological and social problems, this time in the

broader context of global climate change. Having taken some initial steps toward

elaborating an account of complacency by identifying various senses of normative

comfort as forms of character damage, in this fourth chapter I proceed to examine how

damage of this sort is embodied intrapsychically in the form of *settled expectations of*

self-sufficiency. Although indebted in many ways to more traditional approaches to virtue

theory, my approach to understanding complacency as a species of "motivational vice" is

distinguished by its focus on the relational dynamics and structural processes that foster,

sustain and enforce various forms of motivational inertia, including apathy, indifference,

resignation, and despair. For this reason, I draw upon and extend the work of feminist

ethicists, critical philosophers of race, and social moral psychologists, especially those

who take relational and structural approaches to understanding human motivational

capacities and the epistemic practices of socially situated agents. My account also draws

upon and builds on Chris Cuomo's and Susan Sherwin's recent work on the ethical and

political dimensions of climate change. After engaging with the work of Cuomo and

Sherwin, I go on to offer an overview of extant philosophical treatments of complacency

and argue that Nicholas Unwin's and Jason Kawall's accounts are inadequate to the task

of sorting out what it means to be complacent on climate change. In the closing section of

this chapter I offer an alternative account of complacency that further develops the work

of Chapter 3. Although complacency is commonly thought of in terms of feelings of

"self-satisfaction," I argue that regardless of an agent's self-directed feelings and

explicitly held beliefs, they are complacent with respect to climate change insofar as they

are caught up in patterns of behaviour that express settled expectations of self-

sufficiency. I argue that complacency is best regarded as a *relational vice* (and so not a

straightforwardly collective or individual one), suggest how it is fostered, sustained, and enforced among citizens of high-emitting industrialized nations, and chart relationships between motivational inertia, privilege, and power. I also suggest that complacency is not the sort of vice that an agent might "overcome" on their own initiative, and gesture towards some of the ways that various agents have been managing to "shake one another out of" their complacency on climate change.

In Chapter 5, "Conclusion," I turn to the complicated question of what is involved in processes of remedying complacency. As a way of approaching the difficult task of answering such a question, I draw upon Martin Luther King Jr.'s developing insights on the theme of complacency as expressed in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and his posthumously published essay, "Testimony of Hope." I offer a novel reading of King's "Letter" in which I argue that fellow readers will risk missing a deeper sense of complacency that is implicit in the way he confronts white clergymen and moderates throughout if they focus their attention on what he referred to explicitly as "complacency." I read King's confessions of "grave disappointment" as an incisive response to the unbearable complacency of white clergymen and moderates—a response that stops short of actually *calling out* members of these groups as "complacent," but aims, nevertheless, to help shake them out of their motivational inertia. King and other civil rights leaders and activists recognized the need to unearth and make visible social tensions in order to foster needed growth along multiple, interrelated dimensions: epistemic, moral, and sociopolitical. By giving expression to his sorely pained feelings, King affirmed being in relation with the very white clergymen and moderates with whom he was so bewildered, reminding would-be supporters of the black freedom movement

that, "There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love" (King 1963, 772). In the closing section of this fifth and final chapter I consider what processes of remedying complacency involve by putting King's work into dialogue with that of white, male, feminist and anti-racist organizer Chris Crass. I discuss the relationships between repairing character damage and working for broader structural change, exploring some of the ways in which personal transformation is bound up with building culture and community for sustainable, long-term engagement.

This project does not offer any recipes for remedying complacency, nor does it purport to offer any universal or timeless truths on the subject. It is a modest effort born out of five-odd years of trying to learn enough from philosophy to change it for the better. The orientation of this project, the methodologies it favours, and even the actual work of discussing, writing, and thinking it has helped to motivate could not possibly have been cultivated or taken place in isolation. Writing this dissertation has been the most difficult philosophical therapy I have ever loved enduring together with others whom I admire, am grateful for, and forever indebted to. I have been extremely fortunate to learn and work under the guidance of such patient and generous mentors. It is my sincerest hope that many others besides will ruffle, shock, wake, disturb, and vex me yet.

2. Complacency in Nonideal Circumstances

> Always first draw fresh breath after outbursts of vanity and complacency.
>
> - Franz Kafka

2.1. Introduction

The project of my dissertation is to develop an account of complacency that is adequate to contexts of deeply entrenched social and environmental injustice. I am interested, in other words, in understanding what it means to be complacent under what some philosophers call "nonideal circumstances," where the agents who are to act in response to injustice are significantly limited by various forms of character damage and confronted with the complicated work of character repair. Thus, I think of my dissertation as a contribution to a much broader field of inquiry known as "nonideal theory." However, I appreciate that by invoking the language of "nonideal theory" I run the risk of confusing some of my readers, especially those who are more familiar with the work of mainstream political theorists and philosophers over the past forty or so years. I anticipate that these readers will already understand one prominent way of drawing a distinction between ideal and nonideal theory, that they will recall how John Rawls first drew this distinction in his landmark work, *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971), and that they will recognize, with Ingrid Robeyns, that "most of the work done by mainstream political theorists and philosophers is part of what is known as "ideal theory"" (Robeyns 2008, 341). Moreover, many of these readers are likely to be less familiar with the methodological approach to which I am referring when I speak of "nonideal theory," for the approach I have in mind has been discussed far less frequently in debates among mainstream scholars and in

comparably less depth than the approach that Rawls first described in the 1970s. Furthermore, when the approach I have in mind has been discussed at any length, its distinguishing features have seldom been appreciated on their own terms—indeed, it has rarely been recognized as a genuinely alternative approach, let alone one that challenges the presumed methodological and logical primacy of ideal theory.

In this chapter, then, I set myself the task of clarifying what I mean by "nonideal theory" with a view to avoiding any confusion that might arise from my use of this term. The issues at stake here are other and more than merely semantic ones, of course. I want to be as clear as possible on where I stand with respect to a major methodological divide among contemporary political theorists and philosophers—a divide that may have important implications for the theories of social and environmental justice we end up producing, and the policies, practices, and courses of action those theories encourage us to recommend or support. In what follows I will argue in favour of my own stance on these matters by explaining why I have come to believe that the methodological prioritization of ideal theory is a dangerously misguided approach to theorizing about matters of social and environmental justice, and why "naturalized" nonideal theory is the most promising of available alternatives. By arguing for the promise of naturalized nonideal theory I will also be setting the stage for the discussions to come in the third and fourth chapters, where I will go on to examine the phenomenon of complacency in the contexts of mass incarceration and global climate change. To anticipate, I propose that developing an account of complacency in contexts of these sorts is crucial to furthering ongoing efforts aimed at working against the perpetuation of social and environmental injustice and towards the creation of more socially just and ecologically sustainable

societies. Although I will be focusing on the especially complex problems of mass incarceration and global climate change, I hope what I have to say on the topic of complacency will prove relevant in many other contexts of injustice besides.

I proceed as follows. In Section 2.2 I offer a brief overview of how Rawls originally drew the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory before going on to consider how this distinction operates in his own theory of social justice, as well as in much of the work of post-Rawlsian political theorists and philosophers. In Section 2.3 I chart out the diverse objections that have been raised to the methodological prioritization of ideal theory and explain how these objections have been wedded to proposals for alternative methodological approaches. In Section 2.4 I sketch out the aims, central tasks, and methodology of naturalized nonideal theory and argue that, in light of the objections raised in the previous section, it is the most promising of available approaches to theorizing about matters of social and environmental injustice. Finally, in Section 2.5 I explain what developing an account of complacency aims to contribute to this much broader field of inquiry.

2.2. The Methodological Prioritization of the Ideal

How and for what reasons was the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory originally drawn? And what purpose is the distinction meant to serve in the context of normative political philosophy? As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, John Rawls first introduced the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory in his landmark work, *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971, hereafter *Theory*). In the first chapter of *Theory*, Rawls takes for granted that justice is the chief virtue of social institutions and argues that

the primary subject matter of a theory of social justice is "the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation" (Rawls 1971, 6). He offers a fairly straightforward rationale for treating the basic structure as principally important: the way a society's major institutions are regulated has wide-ranging, virtually inescapable and therefore morally serious effects on the quality of the lives of its members. Although people occupying different positions in a given society will have varying levels of access to resources and opportunities for social and economic mobility, their initial positions, and hence their allotment of socioeconomic benefits and burdens, are to a significant extent determined by the arrangement of that society's major institutions. So, the people living under the dominion of those institutions have a legitimate claim to be treated fairly as they cooperate with one another in their daily affairs and have the spoils of their labours distributed—indeed, this is part of what would make those institutions legitimate, rather than merely inescapable. On the assumption that all concerns of social justice boil down to concerns about how a stock of material and social goods are to be distributed among the members of a society (concerns, that is, about the *pattern* in which goods such as income, wealth and material resources, as well as rights, positions in public office, opportunities and the social bases of self-respect are to be distributed), and that it is a society's major institutions which determine the distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation, Rawls sets out to develop a conception of social justice that takes the form of a set of regulative principles for the institutions at issue. The animating thought here is that if we understand society as a system of social cooperation that persists over time, and strive to take an impartial view

of the morally appropriate distribution of benefits and burdens among participants in such a system, then it is possible to converge upon a set of regulative principles that tell the members of a society what social justice objectively requires.[1] On this view, a modern liberal democratic society can be said to meet the objective requirements of social justice based solely on the patterned distribution of material and social goods among its members by its major social institutions, whereas any institutional arrangement that fails to meet these requirements will qualify as unjust.

2.2.1. Ideal and Nonideal Theory

Given that the basic structure of society is the primary subject matter of a theory of social justice, Rawls contends that the first and most important task for the political philosopher is to provide an answer to the question: "what would a perfectly just society be like" (8)? This is where he sees fit to introduce a distinction between ideal and nonideal theory. As Rawls explains, the "intuitive idea" behind this distinction "is to split the theory of justice into two parts" (Rawls 1971, 241). On his view, a complete theory of social justice is to be comprised of both an ideal and a nonideal part, and these parts are to be related to one another in a particular way, for the work of ideal theory is claimed to be methodologically as well as logically prior to that of nonideal theory. Rawls conceives of ideal theory as a way of working out principles for the regulation of a perfectly just basic structure, which culminates in "a conception of a just society that we are to achieve if we can," enabling us to "envision our objective from afar" (6; 246; 22). In other words, the central aim of ideal theory is to produce a well-defined object of aspiration for the design

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[1] Having said this, Rawls is clear that justice as fairness as it pertains to the basic structure is only part of— the distributive part of—a larger ideal of justice (see Rawls 1971, Ch. 1).

and reorganization of a society's major institutions—a vision of what Rawls later comes to call a "realistic utopia" (Rawls 1999, 7). This object of aspiration is then meant to guide and constrain efforts aimed at reorganizing the basic structure of society, while also serving as an evaluative standard according to which actual, historical institutional arrangements "are to be judged" (246). In his earlier work, Rawls refers to this standard as an "Archimedean point for judging the basic structure of society," for the principles specified by ideal theory determine the conditions that must be met before any modern liberal democratic society can be considered perfectly just, while also determining what will count as an unjust institutional arrangement (548).[2]

Whereas the purpose of the ideal part of a theory of social justice is to produce a well-defined object of aspiration for the design and reorganization of major social institutions, the purpose of the nonideal part is to sort out how best to reach that objective—how, that is, to guide the transition to a perfectly just institutional order. As Rawls puts it, nonideal theory "asks how this long-term goal might be achieved, or worked toward, usually in gradual steps. It looks for courses of action that are morally permissible and politically possible as well as likely to be effective" (Rawls 1999, 89). Although the steps taken towards an ideal institutional arrangement may be gradual ones, A. John Simmons explains that,

> we must understand Rawlsian nonideal theory as both strongly *transitional* (as opposed to simply *comparative*) in character and as offering us an *integrated,* not a piecemeal, goal as our target (for assessing policies' possibility and effectiveness). A good policy in nonideal theory is good only

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[2] As is well known, Rawls later revised his theory of justice in *Political Liberalism* and a series of related publications. Because it is not my concern here to give a comprehensive overview of his *oeuvre*, but merely to provide an account of ideal theory as a distinctive way of theorizing and to review Rawls' argument for the methodological prioritization of ideal theory, I will set aside a number of complex exegetical questions having to do with the relationship between his earlier and later work.

as transitionally just—that is, only as a morally permissible part of a feasible overall program to achieve perfect justice, as a policy that puts us in an improved position to reach that ultimate goal. And good policies are good not relative to the elimination of any particular, targeted injustices, but only relative to the integrated goal of eliminating all injustice (Simmons 2010, 20-21).

In light of the overarching aim of guiding the transition to a perfectly just institutional order, Rawls divides the nonideal part of a theory of justice into two subparts, which are to be comprised of distinct sets of principles. The first subpart, which goes unnamed but can be referred to as "unfavourable conditions theory," consists of "the principles for governing adjustments to natural limitations and historical contingencies," such as human frailties and disabilities and extreme scarcity of resources (Rawls 1971, 246). However, Rawls claims that, "How justice requires us to meet injustice is a very different problem from how best to cope with the inevitable limitations and contingencies of human life" (245). So, he refers to the second subpart of nonideal theory, which consists of the "principles for meeting injustice," as "noncompliance theory" or "the partial compliance part" (Rawls 1999, 90; Rawls 1971, 247). Noncompliance theory is meant to address the more readily avoidable and remediable injustices that arise in a given society, including those resulting from behavioural and motivational laxity, as well as from more deliberate efforts to subvert or preclude the establishment of just institutions. Because of the division of labor Rawls sets up between ideal and nonideal theory, he is committed to the view that "injustice" consists of there being only partial or no compliance with the regulative principles specified by ideal theory, where it is the compliance of institutions that is principally at issue (cf. Murphy 1998, 2003). This is one very important sense in which the contents of the ideal part of a theory of social justice are *logically* prior to those of the nonideal part: only those institutional arrangements which in some way deviate

from the ideal as specified by ideal theory will qualify as unjust. Rawls suggests that noncompliance theory,

> comprises such topics as the theory of punishment, the doctrine of just war, the justification of various ways of opposing unjust regimes, ranging from civil disobedience and militant resistance to revolution and rebellion. Also included are questions of compensatory justice and of weighing one form of institutional injustice against another (8).

Although *Theory* offers a sketch for a nonideal theory of civil disobedience and conscientious refusal, and *The Law of Peoples* includes a nonideal theory of international duties, Rawls clearly regards these brief forays into nonideal theory as of secondary importance to the primary and most important task of the political philosopher, which is to establish an integrated objective for political action.

2.2.2. Unpacking the Priority Assumption

Rawls readily acknowledges that actual, historical societies are "seldom well-ordered," and that the problems of nonideal theory are "the more pressing and urgent matters," for these "are the things that we are faced with in everyday life" (5). Nevertheless, he explains that his principal reason for giving methodological and logical priority to ideal theory is that it provides "the *only* basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems" (8-9, my emphasis). Curiously, Rawls claims later on that his conjecture "that it is ideal theory that is fundamental" has been "confirmed" by the main arguments of *Theory* (Rawls 1971, 241). How a conjecture of this sort could be confirmed is left unexplained, however, so it is not clear what he might have meant here. At any rate, I take it that the point of claiming that ideal theory provides the only basis for dealing with the problems confronting us under nonideal circumstances is that it is only *after*

establishing a conception of a perfectly just institutional order that the people living under the dominion of any actual, historical institutions will be able to acquire the requisite knowledge for identifying, diagnosing, and setting priorities for the rectification of existing injustices, let alone for figuring out morally appropriate ways of working to rectify these injustices. The reason is that principles for the regulation of an ideal institutional order are thought to be necessary to (a) provide guidance under nonideal circumstances as to the nature and ends of political action, including the selection of policies and the design of institutions; and to (b) specify priority rules according to which various injustices can be ordered by rank, so that a society's members have a sense for when and how particular injustices should be rectified while keeping the ultimate goal of transitioning to a perfectly just institutional order in view. Rawls claims that the members of a society have a natural (that is, not merely civic) duty "to remove any injustices, beginning with the most grievous as identified by the extent of the deviation from perfect justice." Although "the measure of departures from the ideal is left importantly to intuition," he suggests that, "the lexical ranking of the principles [of ideal theory] specifies which elements of the ideal are relatively more urgent," which helps to "clarify the goal of reform and to identify which wrongs are more grievous and hence more urgent to correct" (246; Rawls 2001, 13). When it comes to the means and methods of working for reform, Rawls argues that the specific policies, practices, and courses of action mandated by nonideal theory must be "morally permissible," "politically possible," and "likely to be effective" in moving towards the ideal of a perfectly just society, while relatively more "grievous" injustices are to be addressed before less severe ones (Rawls 1999, 89).

It is important to appreciate the strength of Rawls' conjecture that ideal theory provides

"the *only* basis for the systematic grasp" of the problems of nonideal theory, for critics

often focus on the primacy he and many other political philosophers give to ideal theory

in their work. To be clear, Rawls is not merely claiming that ideal theory provides a

better or even the *best* basis for identifying, diagnosing, and setting priorities for the

rectification of existing injustices. Rather, he is claiming that because ideal theory

provides the *only* such basis, his approach to theorizing about social justice as a guide to

political action and institutional design is the only game in town. Echoing Rawls

perfectly on this score, Adam Swift claims that, "only by reference to philosophy—

abstract, pure, context-free philosophy—can we have an adequate basis for thinking

about how to promote justice in our current, radically nonideal, circumstances" (Swift

2008, 382). Because a great deal of mainstream, post-Rawlsian political theory and

philosophy conforms to this basic methodological approach, I take it to exemplify a much

broader trend that needs to be understood in detail before its merits and weaknesses can

be properly assessed. Hence the "methodological prioritization of ideal theory" to which

the title of this section refers.

2.2.3. Idealizations and the Original Position

What distinguishes ideal theory as a way of theorizing about social justice? Political

theorists and philosophers who adhere to the methodological prioritization of ideal theory

employ a range of idealizations in the process of working out principles for the regulation

of the basic structure. What exactly are "idealizations"? Idealizations are a species of

abstractions that depict certain aspects of the world differently than they actually are,

ascribing features and capacities to some *x* as it is to be understood in and by a positive or normative theory that are false (and often significantly so) for any actual *x* (see O'Neill 1987, 1988, 1993, 1996; cf. Schwartzman 2006). In the context of normative political philosophy, ideal theorists make use of idealizing assumptions that not only abstract away from but also distort specific features and capacities of any actual *x* (e.g., the features and capacities of human agents, as well as the character of social relations and the regulatory structures of existing social, economic and political institutions), describing *x* as simpler, if not also better or worse than it is in fact along particular descriptive and evaluative dimensions. As Onora O'Neill points out, there are actually two different types of idealizations that need to be parsed apart when thinking through the methodology of ideal theory: (1) *idealizing assumptions* that are false (and often significantly so) of actual human agents and institutions, such as assumptions about the nature of human agency, rationality, relationships, and distributive mechanisms; and (2) the *normative ideals* posited by a theorist—that is, ideals which the theorist acknowledges are not yet descriptive of actual human agents and institutions, but which are offered as goals to be achieved (O'Neill 1996). Idealizations of type (2) are normative ideals in the sense that they are posited as objects of aspiration for institutional and other forms of design or reorganization. These ideals are the outputs of ideal theory, while the idealizing assumptions employed in the process of theory construction are the inputs to ideal theory. Thus, ideal theorists make use of idealizations of type (1) in order to produce idealizations of type (2). Idealizations of type (2) are meant to serve both as practical guides for the selection of policies and the design of institutions, and as evaluative standards according to which existing institutions are to be judged.

There are a variety of idealizing assumptions that could be employed by an ideal theorist, and there are also a number of different ways of making use of these assumptions in the process of working out normative ideals. While Rawls may have been the first to draw a distinction between ideal and nonideal theory, philosophers need not endorse the particular set of regulative principles recommended by his theory of social justice to endorse the practice of ideal theorizing and to count themselves as ideal theorists (perhaps there could be Marxist or right libertarian ideal theorists, for example, who would produce different normative ideals on the basis of different idealizing assumptions). Having said this, Rawls' work still serves as an illustrative case study of the methodology of ideal theory. The ideal part of his theory of social justice is presented as the product of what he calls the "original position" choice problem—a planning venture hypothetically undertaken by *idealized agents* who are endowed with *idealized capacities* and tasked under *idealized background conditions* with choosing and jointly committing themselves to principles for the regulation of the basic structure of an *idealized society*. The agents are described as free and equal members of a society who are to serve as its representatives. They are described as rational, mutually disinterested, fully capable adults who are motivated solely by their own self-interest, although they are also described as "reasonable" insofar as they are endowed with a sense of right and justice, as well as a capacity to form and pursue a conception of the good (Rawls 1971, 145). These agents are said to choose regulatory principles under a "veil of ignorance"— a device designed to ensure fairness and impartiality in judgment by bracketing out all sources of particularized knowledge that would introduce bias and partiality into processes of judgment. Finally, the society for which they are to select regulative

principles is conceived as "a closed system isolated from other societies" (8). This society is assumed to be "well-ordered" in the specific sense that it is "designed to advance the good of its members" and "effectively regulated by a public conception of justice," which is to say that "everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice," "the basic social institutions generally satisfy and are generally known to satisfy these principles," and "everyone is presumed to act justly and do his part in upholding just institutions" (4-5; 8). Rawls refers to this third assumption as that of, "strict" or "full compliance," explaining that agents "in the original position assume that the principles they acknowledge, whatever they are, will be strictly complied with and followed by everyone" (351). All of the above are, of course, idealizing assumptions, for they are false (and often significantly so) of actual human agents, social institutions, and virtually all existing political communities. For instance, most human agents are not fully rational, mutual disinterested, and so forth, and not only are most societies not "well-ordered," but they are also not closed to commercial and other transactions with neighboring or overlapping societies.

If idealizing assumptions are by definition false, then what roles are they meant to play in the process of working out principles for the regulation of the basic structure? In his reflections on methodology, Rawls stresses that the "work of abstraction… is not gratuitous: not abstraction for abstraction's sake. Rather, it is a way of continuing public discussion when shared understandings of lesser generality have broken down" (Rawls 1993, 45-46). Given that people living in actual, historical societies are confronted with widespread, reasonable, yet apparently intractable disagreements over fundamental matters of social justice, Rawls suggests that "the deeper the conflict, the higher the level

of abstraction to which we must ascend to get a clear and uncluttered view of its roots";

and furthermore, that, "formulating idealized, which is to say abstract, conceptions of

society and person… is fundamental to finding a reasonable political conception of

justice" (46). Indeed, his primary rationale for making use of idealizing assumptions is

that he wants to represent original position reasoners as reasoning impartially,

recognizing the principles they choose as autonomously imposed, and jointly committing

themselves to the project of establishing a perfectly just institutional order. Because he

thinks this ultimate goal simply could not be achieved without bracketing out all sources

of prejudice and bias from the process of deliberating and choosing among principles, he

makes use of assumptions that lead him to abstract away from all particularities of

identity, interest, situation and place, as well as from unequal relations of power and

influence within and between actual, historical societies, en route to representing an ideal

of putatively impartial and objective moral reasoning. As Rawls explains,

> We do not look at the social order from our situation but take up a point of
> view that everyone can adopt on an equal footing. In this sense we look at
> society and our place in it objectively: we share a common standpoint along
> with others and do not make our judgments from a personal slant" (516-517).

The point is to ground a theory of social justice independently of the particular

experiences of any of society's actual members, and to lay claim to objectivity on that

basis, so that it will be possible to distinguish between legitimate claims of justice (those

premised on adopting the impartial, "moral point of view" of original position reasoners)

and all other claims, for these are thought to merely express the socially inflected biases

and self-interested motives of those who are unwilling to abandon and transcend their

own egoistic points of view.

In addition to modeling an ideal of impartial reasoning, idealizing assumptions play

various other roles in the process of constructing a theory of social justice. For example,

when it comes to choosing among regulative principles for the basic structure, Simmons

explains that the assumption of full compliance helps ideal theorists, "imagine the results

of getting "up and running" the institutions embodying different conceptions of justice,

which requires imagining that those subject to those institutions support and comply with

them, at least initially" (Simmons 2010, 10). Correlatively, envisioning the compliance of

human agents and institutions with a particular set of regulative principles helps ideal

theorists establish standards of conduct according to which actual, historical behavioural

norms and institutional arrangements can be judged. As Laura Valentini points out, if

"motivational and behavioural weaknesses (beyond a reasonable extent) were factored

into the elaboration of a theory of justice, such a theory would lack the necessary critical

distance to assess the *status quo*, and would thus be seriously defective" (Valentini 2009,

339).

Ingrid Robeyns notes that there are additional variables for which idealizations may be

"necessary to keep the complexity of the theory within manageable boundaries"

(Robeyns 2008, 353). By making use of idealizing assumptions, ideal theorists abstract

away from and distort certain features and capacities of x (y, z…), excluding variables

that they consider to be "distracting details," for this helps them to "reduce the number of

parameters that the theory has to deal with" (Rawls 1993, 12; Robeyns 2008, 353).

Moreover, by making use of idealizing assumptions, ideal theorists sometimes posit

targets for institutional design or reorganization from the outset of theory construction,

for this helps them to "model desirable properties of the ideally just society," including

the properties of the agents who are to inhabit such a society (353). This also leads them to make decisions about which properties of agents and institutions will not be fit for inclusion. For example, Robeyns points out that making use of idealizations is a way to "assume away certain injustices and their causes," such as prejudice and slavery, for in any fully just society "these injustices should simply not occur" (354).

The key points to take away from the foregoing discussion are as follows: Rawls argues, first, that the subject matter of a theory of social justice is the basic structure of society; second, that a complete theory of social justice is to be comprised of two parts, and that the work of ideal theory is methodologically as well as logically prior to that of nonideal theory; third, that ideal theory is the "only" way for political philosophers to work out principles for the regulation of the basic structure, and that ideal theorists need to make use of various idealizing assumptions in the process of working out said principles; fourth, that the nonideal part of a theory of social justice is to come second in the order of investigation, since its contents depend logically upon the ideal part (while also incorporating empirical data concerning actual, historical human agents, institutions, and societies); and fifth, that nonideal theory has a strongly transitional aim, for the principles of nonideal theory indicate which injustices are to be rectified, in what order, and how, in view of the ultimate goal of establishing a perfectly just institutional arrangement.

Before moving on to Section 2.3, I want to emphasize that Rawls' argument in favour of the methodological prioritization of ideal theory is not, in and of itself, an argument for the contents of any particular ideal theory, including the two principles of social justice that he claims would be chosen by original position reasoners. Indeed, the original position is only one way of making use of idealizing assumptions when working out

regulative principles for the basic structure. It is a device or heuristic that places special emphasis on the ideal of impartiality as the hallmark of moral reasoning, on the assumption that non-egoistic, objective moral reasoning is only possible on the condition that the members of a society adopt a universal point of view that is the same for all rational agents considered just as such.[3] The use of other idealizing assumptions, or modifications of the assumptions that Rawls employs when constructing his theory, would no doubt yield different sets of regulative principles that would need to be defended on their own terms and merits. So too would the use of assumptions that abstract away from historical and current circumstances without idealizing the features and capacities of human agents, social institutions, and political communities, although a theory that makes use of abstractions rather than idealizations cannot be said to partake in the methodology of ideal theory for that very reason (O'Neill 1987, 1988, 1993, 1996).

What, then, is the purpose of the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory? As we have seen, ideal theory is way of theorizing that makes use of idealizing assumptions in the process of working out normative ideals, whether the ideals in question are meant to guide the reorganization of the basic structure of society (an ideal of social justice), or the relations between human agents, institutions, and the nonhuman world (an ideal of interspecies or environmental justice), or the relations among persons (an ideal of interpersonal or moral virtue). Regardless of the specific subject matter at issue, the

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[3] As Iris Marion Young points out, the ideal of impartiality is the end product of a search for a universal, objective "moral point of view," the adoption of which is meant to justify claims to moral authority: "The impartial reasoner is detached: reason abstracts from the particular experiences and histories that constitute a situation. The impartial reasoner must also be dispassionate, abstracting from feelings, desires, interests, and commitments that he or she may have regarding the situation, or that others may have. The impartial reasoner is, finally, a universal reasoner. The moral point of view abstracts from the partiality of affiliation, of social or group perspective, that constitutes concrete subjects" (Young 1990, 100; with reference to Darwall 1983, 133-143).

distinction between ideal and nonideal theory has to do with a division of labor across

disciplinary boundaries, and with the extent to which philosophers are obliged to attend

to the work of biological, psychological and social scientists in the process of articulating

their normative ideals. By dividing a normative theory into two parts, proponents of the

methodological prioritization of ideal theory are able to concern themselves with

"abstract, pure, context-free" (Swift 2008, 382) normative-philosophical concerns before

getting down to the messy work of applying their principles to the real world of political

action, and they claim to have very good reason for so doing. The simple and persuasive

idea behind the methodological prioritization of ideal theory is that, "until the ideal is

identified… nonideal theory lacks an objective, an aim, by reference to which its queries

can be answered" (Rawls 1999, 90). Simmons translates this idea into a provocative

challenge to critics of this basic methodological approach: "To dive into nonideal theory

without an ideal theory in hand is simply to dive blind, to allow irrational free rein to the

mere conviction of injustice and to eagerness for change of any sort" (Simmons 2010,

34). He insists that while,

> our attacks on particular, especially offensive injustices may be for us
> understandably compelling, few devotees of "partial justice" would be able to
> sustain their single-minded commitments in the face of clear evidence that
> their efforts were setting back or permanently blocking movement toward
> overall societal justice (22-24).

I take it that this commitment to the realization of an impartially wrought, integrated ideal

of social justice continues to make the prioritization of ideal theory seem to many

philosophers to not only be desirable, but even morally necessary. I have found that for

those who share this commitment, references to "nonideal theory" are typically taken to

mean: "the kind of theory you do when you already have a complete normative ideal in hand."

However, as I will go on to show in Section 2.3, not all philosophers who are working on matters of social and environmental justice share this particular commitment, and there are a number of different reasons for challenging, rethinking, or even abandoning it altogether. Moreover, many of those who describe themselves as working on "nonideal theory," myself included, are in fact doing something quite different than what Rawls originally proposed. The fact that we are not all adopting the same methodological approach has led to considerable confusion in recent literature. In order to clarify where I stand on these matters and where I see my own project making a contribution, it will be important to distinguish among a variety of critiques of the methodological prioritization of ideal theory, as well as the alternative methodologies that have been proposed under the (sometimes misleading) banner of "nonideal theory."

2.3. Challenging the Primacy of the Ideal

Mainstream political theorists and philosophers have for the most part taken for granted Rawls' distinction between ideal and nonideal theory. They have also endorsed his argument in favour of the methodological prioritization of ideal theory. Yet over the past several decades this methodological commitment has given rise to a number of different objections. In light of these objections, several constructive proposals have been advanced suggesting either that more priority ought to be given to nonideal theory, or that ideal theory ought to be abandoned altogether and replaced by an alternative approach to nonideal theory. My aims in this section are modest. I want to be as clear as possible on

where I stand with respect to a major methodological divide among contemporary political theorists and philosophers, and I also want to clarify what I mean when I describe my own work as contributing to "nonideal theory." Although I will not be providing comprehensive expositions of each and every objection that has been raised to the methodological prioritization of ideal theory over the past several decades, I do want to distinguish between two different types of critique that have too easily been muddled together in recent literature. I will refer to critiques of the first type as *calls for reprioritization*. Critiques of this type challenge the methodological prioritization of ideal theory, but instead of proposing a genuinely alternative methodological approach, they leave intact Rawls' distinction between ideal and nonideal theory and merely tinker with or develop further his conception of nonideal theory. I will refer to critiques of the second type as *calls for elimination*. Critiques of this type offer reasons for abandoning ideal theory altogether, and then go on to propose alternative methodological approaches that involve completely reconceptualizing the aims, central tasks, and methodology of nonideal theory. To anticipate, my sympathies lie with a particular rationale for issuing a call for elimination. After elucidating this rationale in Section 2.3.2, I will go on, in Section 2.4, to explain the alternative methodological approach that I will be endorsing: namely, naturalized nonideal theory.

2.3.1. Calls for Reprioritization

The first type of critique I will be discussing challenges the methodological prioritization of ideal theory. But instead of proposing a genuinely alternative methodological approach, critiques of this type leave intact Rawls' distinction between ideal and nonideal theory and merely tinker with or develop further his conception of nonideal theory. There

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are at least two ways of advancing a critique of this type, which I will consider in turn. One is to challenge the assumption that the ideal part of a theory of social justice *must* be completed prior to working out at least some of the principles of the nonideal part. For example, Gopal Sreenivasan defends an approach to nonideal theory as "an anticipation of ideal theory" (Sreenivasan 2007, 221). He argues that by making assumptions "about the minimum requirements that *any plausible and complete* ideal theory of justice will include," his approach to nonideal theory "can define targets for practical action *before* a complete ideal has been worked out," prescribing policies, practices and courses of action that "anticipate the ideal requirements of justice rather than presupposing them" (221, original emphasis). Given that it is possible to anticipate at least the minimum requirements of social justice, Sreenivasan claims that, "the priority assumption fails" (221). Clearly, his approach to nonideal theory is in some relevant respects different than the approach that Rawls originally proposed in *Theory*. However, notice that the principles elaborated by Sreenivasan's nonideal theory would still depend logically upon the contents of the ideal part of a theory (or theories) of social justice, for the action-guiding prescriptions they generate are premised on at least some of the (anticipated) requirements of a complete normative ideal (or ideals). Thus, Sreenivasan's argument in favour of an anticipatory approach to nonideal theory only shows that a rather weak version of the priority assumption fails. Although he may have devised a way of getting around the *methodological* prioritization of ideal theory, he still takes for granted its *logical* priority, which suggests that he thinks of ideal theory as an indispensable source of normative guidance for the design and reorganization of the basic structure.

There is another way of issuing a call for reprioritization which, rather than challenging the assumption that the ideal part of a theory of social justice *must* be completed prior to working out the principles of the nonideal part, focuses instead on the fact that ideal theory *has been* prioritized to the point of becoming the dominant focus of political philosophers. For example, although Ingrid Robeyns is mostly in favour of the methodological prioritization of ideal theory, and although she encourages philosophers to build bridges between the normative ideals they construct and the practical queries of actual, historical agents, she argues that "*much* more work needs to be done on developing nonideal theory, and on better understanding what is needed for nonideal theory to provide an effective bridge between ideal theory and action design and implementation" (Robeyns 2008, 362). Robeyns challenges the continued prioritization of ideal theory among philosophers by calling attention to two undeniable facts: first, the nonideal parts of even the most prominent theories of social justice have not yet been fleshed out, so the principles of these theories *have not* been, and indeed *cannot* be applied in the real world of political practice; and second, nonideal theory remains underdeveloped from a methodological perspective, so it is not even clear how the nonideal parts of prominent theories *could* be fleshed out were philosophers to shift their priorities. While there has been some insightful work done on nonideal theory, Robeyns stresses that there is as of yet "no systematic and comprehensive account of what a nonideal theory of justice entails, or on which methodological basis it would rest" (348). For instance, it remains unclear to many "whether the principles of justice need to be adapted when we are theorizing in nonideal circumstances, or how to weigh the different

principles of justice" when determining which policies, practices, and courses of action to recommend or support (347).

Although Sreenivasan and Robeyns grant that ideal theory is helpful for working out what a perfectly just society would be like, they both issue calls for reprioritization out of a concern that ideal theory provides *inadequate practical guidance* to those seeking to rectify existing injustices and to work towards the creation of more just institutional arrangements under currently nonideal circumstances. This concern has been no doubt been amplified in the face of the increasingly pressing economic and social crises of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century (e.g., the global economic collapse of 2008), yet it has been expressed in several different ways over the past forty or so years. Some philosophers have suggested that the regulative principles generated by ideal theory provide inadequate practical guidance insofar as they fail to motivate actual agents under current circumstances (Geuss 2008, 9; Valentini 2009, 340), while others have argued that these principles are not directly or immediately applicable under current circumstances (Phillips 1985, 551-570; Schmidtz 2011, 778-782), or that, in some cases, they are not even applicable in principle, for the gap between these ideals and everyday practical reasoning simply cannot be bridged (Feinberg 1973, 263-275; Baier 1985, 210; McCarthy 2004, 147-170). Seeing as how the principles of nonideal theory are designed to be directly and immediately applicable under current circumstances, and would arguably do a better job of motivating actual agents for that very reason, the thought here is that priority ought to be given to the development of the methodology of nonideal theory and to the elaboration of the nonideal parts of particular theories of social justice. Moreover, if the principles produced by ideal theory are not even applicable in principle,

then until it has been shown that the gap between these ideals and everyday practical reasoning is in fact bridgeable, those who are concerned with reducing and redressing injustice should definitely give priority to nonideal theory, leaving the work of ideal theory to those who are primarily or exclusively concerned with acquiring knowledge for the sake of knowledge. For example, Gerry Cohen maintains that rather than telling us "what we should do," political philosophy is about "what we should think, even when what we should think makes *no* practical difference" (Cohen 2003, 243; see also Cohen 2008).

In summary, then, calls for reprioritization are motivated by the urgent need for action guidance in the face of manifest injustice. They each take for granted, though, that ideal theory is the "only" way for political philosophers to work out principles for the regulation of the basic structure, and that ideal theorists need to made use of various idealizing assumptions in the process of working out said principles. Rather than taking issue with the methodology of ideal theory or disputing its logical priority, and rather than protesting the way the aims, tasks, and methodology of nonideal theory have been circumscribed on this model, they urge philosophers to press on with the work of nonideal theory, either by anticipating the minimum requirements of social justice, or by taking these requirements as well enough established. Thus, they participate in, rather than offer genuine alternatives to, what has become the dominant way of doing normative political philosophy.

2.3.2. Calls for Elimination

By way of contrast, the second type of critique I will be discussing offers reasons for abandoning ideal theory altogether. Its proponents then go on to propose alternative methodological approaches that involve completely reconceptualizing the aims, central tasks, and methodology of nonideal theory. It is important not to confuse calls for elimination with the calls for reprioritization surveyed above in Section 2.3.1. Whereas calls for reprioritization grant that ideal theory is an indispensable source of normative guidance, calls for elimination are motivated by a number of different objections to ideal theory *per se*, each of which suggests that ideal theory is an inherently flawed way of theorizing about matters of social justice. For example, when Colin Farrelly declares his willingness "to abandon ideal theorizing," he is not merely challenging the claim the ideal part of a theory of social justice *must* be completed prior to working out the principles of the nonideal part. Nor is he merely lamenting the fact that ideal theory *has been* prioritized to the point of becoming the dominant focus of political philosophers. Rather, he is claiming that ideal theory fails to provide adequate practical guidance because of its excessive use of idealizing assumptions; and he is effectively putting into question the very status of ideal theory as "a *normative* theory" on that basis (Farrelly 2007, 848; 845, original emphasis).

Farrelly is certainly not the only or the first philosopher to express concern over *excessive idealizing*, or what is sometimes called the *fact-insensitivity* of ideal theory. Philosophers who share worries of these sorts argue that the methodology of ideal theory ought to be abandoned because it relies too heavily on idealizations, which is to say that it requires theorists to make use of idealizing assumptions of *too many different types*, and to idealize the features and capacities of human agents, institutions, and political

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communities *to an excessive extent*. As a consequence of their heavy reliance on idealizing assumptions, ideal theorists typically fail to take into account an adequate range and quantity of empirical data concerning the historical development and present configuration of various social, economic and political institutions, not to mention well-established facts from the biological, psychological, and social sciences (Dunn 1990; Farrelly 1007; Geuss 2008). Self-described "realists" claim that taking account of facts of these sorts is crucial to figuring out how best to organize the collective lives of actual human beings, and that details such as these cannot simply be incorporated into a theory of social justice at the nonideal stage without irretrievable normative loss. If the base assumptions undergirding the ideal part of a theory of social justice leads it to be so far removed from actual circumstances that it turns out to be useless in practice, then there must be some sort of threshold above which a theory ceases to qualify as normative in an action-guiding sense. Those who worry about *excessive idealizing* urge political philosophers not to cross such a threshold, and to adopt a more fine-grained, realistic approach to characterizing the nature and ends of political action.

As we have seen, Farrelly's call for elimination is motivated by a concern about *inadequate practical guidance*, which is rooted in a deeper concern about *excessive idealizing*. There are several other ways of motivating calls for elimination, however, and for my own purposes it will be important not to confuse these distinct rationales with one another.[4] For example, Amartya Sen, David Schmidtz and David Wiens all argue in

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[4] I have noticed an unfortunate tendency in recent literature to lump what are in fact distinct calls for elimination together. For example, when Sofia Stemplowska claims that Farrelly and Charles W. Mills both, "want to show that making false or significantly false assumptions will make a theory useless," she is obscuring the fact that a theory can be worse than useless precisely when it is useful, which is one of Mills' chief concerns (Stemplowska 2008, 324). Valentini also fails to distinguish between concerns over *excessive idealizing* and *pernicious idealizing* when she characterizes the positions of Mills, Annette Baier

related ways for the elimination of ideal theory based on the claim that the ideal part of a

theory of social justice is neither necessary nor sufficient as a foundation for the nonideal

part (Sen 2006, 2009; Schmidtz 2011; Wiens 2012). Instead of taking issue with ideal

theory *per se,* these critics challenge the methodological prioritization of ideal theory by

explaining how the work of nonideal theory could proceed in the absence of an integrated

target for the design and reorganization of major social institutions (that is, without even

needing to anticipate such a target, as in Sreenivasan's approach to nonideal theory). By

way of contrast, Lisa Tessman and a number of other feminist philosophers argue that

ideal theory should presently be abandoned because "it is not the best foundation for

nonideal theory but rather is the wrong starting point for theories meant to guide the

reduction and redress of injustice or oppression" (Tessman 2010, 805). Each of these

critics is arguing that ideal theory ought to be abandoned and replaced, not by nonideal

theory as Rawls originally conceived of it, and not by an approach of the likes of

Sreenivasan's that still depends logically on ideal theory, but instead by one of several

alternative approaches to nonideal theory that take as their point of departure peoples'

situated experiences of injustice and oppression. These critics are arguing, on the one

hand, that a theory of social justice either does not need to have or should not have an

ideal part; and on the other hand, that if nonideal theory is still a viable and worthwhile

project in its own right, then it ought to be understood as a wholly autonomous pursuit

with a distinctive methodology. To the best of my knowledge, the alternative approaches

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and Thomas McCarthy (Valentini 2009, 341-343). Simmons follows suit when he writes that, "the mere fact that ideal theory, by its very nature, is derived through "the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual" has seemed to some critics to altogether disqualify such ideal theory as respectable political philosophy" (Simmons 2010, 31—citing Mills 2005, 268). Because he ignores the specificity of concerns over *pernicious idealizing*, he mistakenly positions Mills alongside Farrelly, distorting his most important points (Simmons 2010, 31-32).

to nonideal theory that have been proposed in the literature to date include "comparative theory" (Sen 2006, 2009); "institutional failure analysis" (Wiens 2012); "critical theory" (Young 1990; McCarthy 2004; Jaggar 2009); "nonideal standpoint theory" (Schwartzman 2006); and a cluster of related "naturalized" approaches (Jaggar 2000; Walker 2003, 2007; Pateman & Mills 2007; Mills 1998, 2005, 2009; Kittay 2009; Tessman 2005, 2009, 2010).[5] I will discuss the last group at length in Section 2.4.

I want to focus on a selection of objections that Tessman and other feminist philosophers have levelled against the methodology of ideal theory, for my sympathies lie with their rationale for issuing a call for elimination (as opposed to the rationales offered by Farrelly, Sen, Schmitz, and Wiens, that is). Tessman and other feminist philosophers argue, not just that ideal theory relies too heavily on idealizations of too many different types, etc., but that it relies on *pernicious idealizations* and ends up providing *inappropriate practical guidance* for that reason. Certain idealizing assumptions have been singled out as pernicious because they deprive prospective users of a theory of resources for understanding and addressing problems that a theory of social justice arguably ought to illuminate. By making use of these assumptions in the process of elaborating principles for the regulation of the basic structure, ideal theorists abstract away from or treat as irrelevant complex histories and present realities of group-based oppression, domination, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, violence, and cultural imperialism, illegitimately restricting the meaning and scope of justice and

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[5] Evidently, Wiens is simply mistaken when he claims that the "debate on the relationship of ideal theory to nonideal theory suffers from a dearth of clear alternatives to the ideal guidance approach" (Wiens 2012, 45). Alternatives abound. Each of the alternatives listed here can be traced to distinctive, sometimes overlapping traditions of thought, including Marxism, pragmatism, second and third wave feminisms, and critical race theory.

effectively wiping the slate clean for the sake of future-oriented planning ventures. Indeed, Tessman argues that, "the dominance of ideal theorizing blocks people from understanding the workings of oppression," reinforcing insidious moral, social and political ignorance rather than simply leaving unfortunate gaps in knowledge unfilled (Tessman 2010, 806). Because engaging in ideal theorizing means focusing, "through idealizations, on a society that is free of oppression and on agents who do not suffer and have not ever suffered from oppression," Tessman points out quite rightly that "the ideal theorist is prevented from considering the problems that pertain to people by virtue of their being oppressed" (806).

Iris Marion Young adds that "many discussions of social justice not only ignore the institutional contexts within which distributions occur, but often presuppose specific institutional structures," such as hierarchically organized government and corporate institutions, a capitalist economy, and highly stratified social structures "whose justice they fail to bring under evaluation" (Young 1990, 22). The neglect of social, economic, and political problems that are structural in character and not necessarily localizable to the basic structure tends to be coupled with false reassurance on the part of defenders of ideal theory, who have no choice but to claim that problems of this sort ultimately boil down to the question of how best to distribute material and social goods among the members of a society. However, because ideal theory treats the members of a society as undifferentiated individuals whose only relation to one another takes the form of a comparison of the bundles of goods they possess (taking both social atomism and possessive individualism for granted), it is incapable of treating individuals as members of social groups whose identities are constituted by the internal relations within and

among different groups and to the modes of production and consumption in which they participate. For this reason, ideal theory is incapable of taking account of, let alone prescribing strategies for addressing, unequal relations of power and influence among the members of a society. Yet power relations shape decision-making processes at every level of social and economic organization, as well as divisions of labor and responsibility in every sphere of life, whether among family members, coworkers, or public officials. Thus, these relations have significant effects not only on the processes through which material goods and resources are distributed among a society's members, but also on what activities differently positioned people are able to participate in in various contexts, including communicative and cooperative activities that are integral to controlling the conditions of their own lives and livelihoods as well as the lives of those with whom they share an affinity. In the meantime, the view that the methodological prioritization of ideal theory is the only game in town "makes it difficult for people to formulate effective plans for resisting oppression and to morally justify such resistance; in fact, it may make actions aimed at combating (or just surviving) oppression appear aberrant and even immoral" (806). After all, if the scope of "injustice" is restricted to there being only partial or no compliance with the regulative principles specified by ideal theory, then all claims of injustice falling outside of this logic will be counted as illegitimate or simply go unrecognized, and the aims, tasks, and methodology of nonideal theory will be artificially circumscribed on that basis.

While certain idealizing assumptions deprive a theory's users of resources for understanding and resisting systemic oppression and domination, other assumptions have been singled out as pernicious for replicating insidious ideologies either individually or

collectively. If ideal theorists implicitly endorse an oppressive ideology through the base assumptions they employ in the process of constructing their theories, and the prescriptions their theories generate reproduce ignorance with respect to a variety of problems confronting the most disadvantaged and disempowered members of society, then users of those theories will inevitably end up perpetuating those very problems through the courses of action they choose, the practices in which they participate, and the policies they support. As Susan Babbitt points out,

> If sexism, say, is embedded in some of the concepts and terms in which information and events are understood, including conceptions of justice, it cannot simply be taken for granted that considerations of justice, in the abstract, will show us how to eliminate it (Babbitt 1996, 90).

To take another example, if ableism is built into a theory of social justice because it relies on idealizations that implicitly treat people with disabilities as nonexistent or undesirable, then the policies it recommends will hardly be hospitable, let alone helpful, to the people who have been theorized away as "distracting details" (Rawls 1993, 12). Now, defenders of ideal theory might point out that Rawls' difference principle, for example, requires that institutional arrangements be to the advantage of the least well-off members of society, and so would distribute material and social goods in the direction of the disabled. But this misses the point of the objection. However, the point is not that the ideal part of any particular theory of social justice would end up treating those with disabilities differently than others from a distributive point of view, but rather that ideal theory as such, *qua* methodology, fails to take into account the specific needs and challenges of the disabled, for it recognizes no differences among persons, or across the lifespans of individual persons, and deals instead with a uniform set whose features and capacities are in various ways idealized. This suggests, implicitly, that the specific needs and challenges of the

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disabled do not exist or are irrelevant from an institutional design perspective, and that treating everyone in the same way—no matter the consequences, and regardless of real differences in capacities relevant to flourishing—is more important than doing well by people as they are.

Lisa Schwartzman warns that the "effects of oppression can be deep seated and yet invisible," for they shape how we come to be cognitively and emotionally configured under currently unjust circumstances and the linguistic resources we draw upon when elaborating our theories (Schwartzman 2006, 566; see also Bartky 1990; Thomas 1992/1993, 233-250; Sullivan & Tuana 2007). Even for ideal theorists who explicitly aim to dismantle systems of oppression and domination in a society stratified and expressed spatially along lines of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, class, age and ability, Schwartzman warns that, "attempts simply to 'abstract' from all knowledge about the social structure may backfire and implicitly endorse the effects of dominant ideologies" (Schwartzman 2006, 566; for an illustrative case study, see Young 1990, Ch. 3). For this reason, Schwartzman argues that there is a "need to focus more on the question of how to avoid employing false idealizations and oppressive or ideological normative ideals" (574; cf. Robeyns 2008, 358-362).

However, perhaps this is not the kind of question that can be answered by simply thinking long and hard under currently unjust circumstances. Babbitt warns that even the most carefully crafted idealizations may turn out to disproportionately reflect the interests of socially dominant groups when they have been articulated under social, economic and political circumstances "that preclude even the imaginability of genuine alternatives or the plausibility of their pursuit" (Babbitt 1996, 9). For example, while the methodological

priority of ideal theory is often justified though appeals to the moral importance of the ideal of impartiality, Young argues that this ideal serves a number of ideological functions in the context of a modern liberal democratic welfare state. First of all, the ideal of impartiality "supports the idea of a neutral state, which in turn provides some ground for the distributive paradigm of justice," which, as we have seen, artificially limits the scope of justice to matters of distributive fairness while failing to bring the justice of the social structures and economic arrangements under evaluation, even though they play significant roles in shaping distributing processes and constraining the activities of individuals and groups. Secondly, the ideal of impartiality "legitimates bureaucratic authority and hierarchical decisionmaking processes, defusing calls for democratic decisionmaking" and contributing to the reification of existing organizational schemes at every level of government. Third and finally, the ideal of impartiality "reinforces oppression by hypostasizing the point of view of privileged groups into a universal position," for as a matter of fact, members of privileged groups tend to occupy powerful and authoritative decision-making positions (Young 1990, 112).

Charles W. Mills expresses a similar range of concerns when he argues that the methodology of ideal theory *inevitably* reproduces oppressive ideologies:

> If we ask the simple, classic question of *cui bono*?" he writes, "then it is obvious that ideal theory can only serve the interests of the privileged, who, in addition—precisely because of that privilege (as bourgeois white males)— have an experience that comes closest to that ideal, and so experience the least cognitive dissonance between it and reality… So, as generally emphasized in the analysis of hegemonic ideologies, it is not merely the orientation by this group's interests that serves to buttress ideal theory, but their (doubly) peculiar experience of reality (Mills 2005, 172).

Mills' concern about the inexorability of pernicious idealizations from ideal theory generates the more forceful objection that philosophers should not rely on *any* idealizing

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assumptions when elaborating theories of social justice (172). The central thought here is that enormously complex social, economic and political problems demand appropriately complex solutions. Because idealizing assumptions simplify x (y, z…) to the point of ignoring or distorting the problems that ought to fall under the scope of a theory of social justice, making use of these assumptions precludes the possibility of prescribing adequate solutions to those problems.

Instead of relying on idealizing assumptions and running the risk of uncritically employing pernicious idealizations, Mills recommends that philosophers make use of "abstractions that *do* reflect the specificities of group experience," drawing on the experiences of members of oppressed groups to more accurately identify, diagnose, and work towards developing remedies for various structural problems (173). Other critics of the methodological prioritization of ideal theory have advanced the even stronger objection that philosophers should not rely on *abstractions* when elaborating theories of social justice (171-173; cf. Stemplowska 2008, 327). Proponents of this objection argue that close attention must be paid to life as it is lived in particular historical, cultural, and political circumstances. They typically adopt particularist stances that hinge on rejecting normative generalizations as distorting and potentially harmful, especially generalizations that have not been generated in the course of political struggles from the standpoints of active participants, which includes those generalizations that would be required for nonparticipant observers to develop a theory of social justice (see, e.g., Mohanty 1988, 65-88; Mohanty 2003).

Critics of ideal theory who single out certain idealizing assumptions as pernicious, or who completely reject the use of idealizations, are generally more inclined to protest the

provision of *inappropriate practical guidance* than they are to worry about the provision

of merely *inadequate practical guidance*. For these critics, it is not just that ideal theory

says *too little* about what ought to be done to rectify injustice here and now (recall that

this was Farrelly's concern). Rather, because ideal theory is, by design, incapable of

identifying and diagnosing the structural causes of injustice and oppression, it can only

give inappropriate and in some cases positively harmful advice, recommending and

justifying support for problematic policies, offering psychologically impossible and

morally repugnant action guidance (see, e.g., Phillips 1985, 556-561; Baier 1985, 222;

Goodin 1995, 38), and reinforcing an oppressive status quo that is implicitly legitimized

and hidden from view (see, e.g., Young 1990, 91). These critics claim that ideal theory is

an inherently flawed way of doing normative political philosophy, because (i) the

uncritical endorsement and employment of pernicious idealizing assumptions leads to the

provision of distorting and potentially harmful practical guidance (Babbitt 1996;

Schwartzman 2006); or because (ii) even the most careful critical scrutiny of idealizing

assumptions cannot prevent theories from producing distorted normative ideals that

inevitably provide damaging practical guidance, perpetuating oppression (Mills 2005); or

because (iii) all theories abstract away from the concrete contingencies of the lived world

in the process of recommending how it is to be navigated, leaving a significant normative

residue in the process and inevitably providing problematic practical guidance (Mohanty

1988, 2003).

In summary, calls for elimination have been motivated by a number of different

objections to the methodological prioritization of ideal theory. While some critics suggest

that ideal theory ought to be abandoned because it provides *inadequate practical*

guidance (Farrelly 2007), or because it is neither necessary nor sufficient for the provision of useful practice guidance under current circumstances (Sen 2006, 2009; Schmidtz 2011; Wiens 2012), the critics whose rationale I endorse are concerned that ideal theory relies on *pernicious idealizations* and provides *inappropriate practical guidance*. The key question for each of these critics is: how then are we to go about understanding and responding to manifest injustice under currently nonideal circumstances? How, in particular, is it possible to identify and diagnose serious structural problems, to formulate effective plans for resisting oppression, and to morally justify such resistance without having a complete normative ideal already in hand, or at least a sketchy, partial ideal? In the next section I will go on to discuss the methodology of an alternative approach to nonideal theory, which is known as "naturalized" nonideal theory. This approach begins from peoples' situated experiences of injustice and oppression, and then works towards, rather than from, the articulation of normative ideals, effectively inverting the methodology that Rawls originally proposed in *Theory* without accepting his circumscription of the aims, tasks, and methodology of nonideal theory. Since I will be endorsing this approach and taking it as the assumed background in chapters to come, it is worth pausing here to consider it at length.

2.4. Naturalized Nonideal Theory

How then are we to understand the aims, central tasks, and methodology of an alternative approach to nonideal theory? How does such an approach compare with the strongly transitional conception of nonideal theory that Rawls originally proposed? In this section I set out to address these questions through a consideration of recent efforts to "naturalize" nonideal theory. Although there are a cluster of related approaches that can

be described as broadly "naturalistic" in spirit, the subset that I shall take as my focus aims to mitigate, avert and eliminate injustice broadly construed, such that systemic forms of oppression, domination, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, violence, and cultural imperialism are among the problems to be addressed (Frye 1983; Young 1990, Ch. 2).

Given this explicit, complex aim, the primary task for proponents of naturalized nonideal theory is to develop, in an "empirically obligated" way, "a descriptive account of the actual, nonideal, unjust world that we inhabit, in order to get a concrete sense of how injustices operate and how they could, consequently, be reduced or overcome" (Walker 2003, 104; Tessman 2010, 806). The subject matter of such an approach includes the major social, economic, and political institutions under the dominion of which people go about making and remaking their lives together, as well as a variety of other institutions and organizational forms that bear significantly on how our lives go and on how we come to be cognitively and emotionally configured in and through our ongoing interpersonal, professional and political relationships, both chosen and unchosen (e.g., in the context of schools, universities, hospitals, courts of law, prisons, NGOs, domestic and multinational corporations, churches, clubs, social groups, families and so on). This approach is "naturalistic" in a broad sense, for it involves developing a suitably rich account of a particular aspect or region of a given social order by consulting and collaborating with specialists in the social and psychological sciences, while also drawing from "illustrative and interpretive studies of human perception, character, and motivation in history, literature, art, and law and the study of institutions, practices, and discourses that shape how we understand ourselves and our moral boundaries," as well as the testimonies,

reports, written memoirs and other expressive resources through which our lived

experiences are articulated (Walker 2004, xii; Campbell 1997, 2003).

2.4.1. Situated Acknowledgement, Description, and Evaluation

Naturalized nonideal theory stems from the conviction that careful, intelligent reflection

on matters of injustice and oppression begins "in a hearing, in heeding a call, rather than

in asserting and mastering a state of affairs, however ideal" (Young 1990, 5). Suspicious

of the urge to transcend the particularities of identity, interest, situation and place for the

sake of constructing a totalizing theory, proponents of naturalized nonideal theory listen

attentively to calls of injustice, "claims *upon* some people by others" which are always

situated in, and issue forth from, "concrete social and political practices that precede and

exceed the philosopher" (5). A call of injustice invites those who are capable of listening

to reflect upon and press towards an enriched understanding of the social world we

currently inhabit, of how societies have developed historically, and of what further

possibilities exist and are worth pursuing for others as well as ourselves. According to

Iris Marion Young, working towards an empirically informed descriptive account of the

social world we inhabit involves inquiring into how various social, economic, and

political organizations and institutions are dynamically structured; through what

processes social structures are produced, reproduced and reorganized; how those social

processes operate through the actions of differently positioned agents and agencies; and

under what sociohistorical background conditions those agents and agencies are poised to

act and interact with one another (Young 1990, 2006, 2011). Drawing on the work of

sociologists Peter Blau and Anthony Giddens, Young describes social structures as

consisting "in the connections among social positions and their relationships, and the way the attributes of positions internally constitute one another through those relationships" (Young 2006, 112). She warns us not to think of social structures as static entities, for structures of this sort exist "only in the action and interaction of persons... not as a state, but as a process," which Giddens calls "structuration" (112). A process of structuration continually reproduces itself over time insofar as people continue to understand and act according to received rules, relations, routines, procedures and expectations, making use of the resources available to them from the social positions they occupy. Collectively, these rules and resources constitute the sociohistorical and material background conditions in and from which people go about their lives, acting and interacting with one another in a more or less coordinated fashion. By coming to occupy different social positions in relation to one another and to the economy, people are afforded different opportunities for developing and exercising various capacities and skills, as well as for participating, through communicative and cooperative activities, in determining the conditions under which their lives will be lived (Young 1990, 37). Some people enjoy various privileges and opportunities while having access to a range of material and other resources in virtue of the positions they occupy and the relatively dominant statuses they are afforded. Others are disadvantaged and constrained in their prospects for self-development and self-determination, which significantly increases their vulnerability to material deprivation and economic hardship.

When social and institutional processes continually constrain and disable some people in their actions while enabling and supporting others, Young argues that the structural character of oppression is manifested as "embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and

symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective

consequences of following those rules" (41). She contends that oppression is a *structural*

concept because it cannot be understood as stemming solely from the intended actions of

any particular persons, social groups or organizations, and yet neither is it merely a

function of the way a society's major institutions have been arranged, or of the overt

coercive force of state agents and agencies. According to Young, a variety of agents and

agencies participate by their actions in the social processes that produce unjust outcomes,

no matter how unwitting they may be as to their participation, and no matter how

unintentionally their contributions are made. Susan Sherwin adds that relevant processes

often incorporate the actions of agents and agencies operating at a number of different

"levels of social organization," so they cannot be adequately understood by focusing

exclusively on any particular level (e.g., the interpersonal, intergroup or

interorganizational levels; see Sherwin 2012). Young refers to the outcomes of these

processes as "unjust" because they are products of collective action that constrain and

contract certain people's opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities,

putting them under a "systematic threat of domination or deprivation" (Young 2006,

114). She coins the term "structural injustice" to refer to the complex objects of her

critical scrutiny, for the injustice lies partly in the background conditions under which

collective action continually takes place, and these conditions have historical sources and

are subject to further revision through processes of collective decision-making, (114; see

also Young 2011).

By referring to the institutional and social processes through which certain groups are

continually constrained and disabled while others benefit and are enabled as "unjust,"

Young is clearly invoking a normative concept and not merely describing a state of affairs. Has she not thereby fallen prey to the "naturalistic fallacy"? Well, a flatfooted naturalist does run the risk of drawing problematic inferences from the way things are to how they should be (or in this case, should *not* be). Yet as Eva Feder Kittay explains, while flatfooted naturalists and naturalized nonideal theorists both begin by developing an empirically informed descriptive account of actual, historical social orders, the latter group claims to be able to derive an "ought" from an "is" without committing the naturalistic fallacy because they understand "practices as already having embedded norms, norms which have to do with the effective carrying out of the practice" (Kittay 2009, 144, n.7). Because the person who is calling the norms embedded in certain practices "unjust" is a participant in those practices who has certain roles, responsibilities, and commitments in virtue of the position she occupies, the "ought" expressed by her judgment needs to have been derived through a suitable critical process, as opposed to a yet more detailed description of how the practices work, and of what they accomplish, from her own limited and partial perspective. The challenge for proponents of naturalized nonideal theory, then, is to find a way to critically evaluate embedded norms without purporting to occupy an impartial standpoint that transcends the practices they are describing from within.

Margaret Urban Walker suggests that participants need objects of comparison in order to identify and reflect critically upon the practices they are currently implementing, for "when we ask ourselves what can be said for some way of life, we are asking whether it is better or worse than some other way we know or imagine" (Walker 2007, 13). Examples of contrasting practices within the societies or communities whose ways of life

are under scrutiny would do, as would practices that have already been implemented by people living in other societies or communities, or imaginable and accessible alternatives that have yet to be implemented. Moreover, other participants occupying different positions and playing different roles within the practices currently under way can offer invaluable insights through their reports and testimonies, seeing as how their perspectives on how those practices work, and what they accomplish, may well be significantly different than one's own, rooted as they are in a stock of social experiences one does not share. Walker proposes a critical process that involves checking to see whether certain practices *actually work* in the ways differently situated practitioners *think* they do, constantly pressing "towards transparency" in order to figure out whether these practices "can account for themselves morally" (12). She argues that,

> self-directed behavior for which people are accountable ought to be able to make sense *in fact* in ways that at the same time make sense *to them*. If it does not or cannot, then there is at least confusion, if not something worse, afoot, such as coercive power, or duplicity, or manipulation, even force (12).

By reflecting critically from diverse participant perspectives on the practices we are currently implementing, Walker suggests that we can move towards a "fully normative" stage of reflection that requires us to figure out whether "how *we* live" is also "how *to* live." On her view, an ensemble of practices constitutes a way *to* live insofar as it is widely recognized "a way worthy of people's allegiance, effort, restraint, or sacrifice" by people who live together "in a particular set of historical, cultural, and material circumstances, which already include some legacy of moral understandings and practices of responsibility" (Walker 2003, 109; Walker 2007, 13).

2.4.2. Proposing Ideals: Strong Objectivity

In summary, naturalized nonideal theorists start by listening attentively to situated calls of injustice, acknowledging claims that have been pressed upon some people by others. They are moved by these calls to reflect critically upon the social world we currently inhabit, which means developing an empirically informed descriptive account of particular aspects or regions of the social order and then identifying and diagnosing structural causes of injustice and oppression by taking into account the perspectives of differently situated participants. Then, through a critically reflective and comparative process, they go on to propose conditions and ways of life that are not only achievable but also widely judged to be worthy of the aspirations of the individuals and groups who live together under a particular set of instituted circumstances. Finally, naturalized nonideal theorists set out to provide guidance on how to move towards those conditions and ways of life from currently unjust circumstances. Throughout each of the processes involved in identifying, diagnosing, and proposing remedies for systemic forms of injustice and oppression, proponents of naturalized nonideal theory take seriously the fact that actual people typically fail to align with their fully rational, impartial and unprejudiced selves. We then attempt to make do, the best we can, by drawing upon the most reliable sources of empirical evidence and discursive procedures at our disposal, without giving up on the possibility of making claims to objectivity. I agree with Young that, "just norms are most likely to arise from the real interaction of people with different points of view who are drawn out of themselves by being forced to confront and listen to others," rather than by aspiring to a utopian ideal of impartiality, the achievement of which is not a real possibility. "Just decisionmaking structures must thus be democratic,"

she writes, "ensuring a voice and vote to all the particular groups involved in and affected by the decisions" (Young 1990, 116).

Taking Young's recommendation for the democratization of political decision-making as my point of departure, I want to suggest that whatever normative ideals are proposed by naturalized nonideal theorists must be arrived at through a maximally critical process—specifically, a process that is oriented towards a normative analogue of what Sandra Harding calls "strong objectivity" (Harding 1993, 2004). According to Harding, strong objectivity "requires that the *subject* of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the *objects* of knowledge," in a strongly reflexive maneuver that is employed to facilitate the identification and mitigation of problematic socially inflected biases (Harding 1993, 69). We might think of a reflexive maneuver of this type as a realistic substitute for the idealistic fiction of the original position, where instead of aspiring toward the impossible ideal of impartiality, participants in democratic decision-making acknowledge their own inevitable partiality and make themselves accountable to others by inviting informed critique. Harding argues that maximally objective research processes and results require more than a strong and well-studied methodology, for they also require rigorous and critical studies of researchers, and these studies demand careful scrutiny of the ongoing activities and practices of entire research communities. However, Harding contends that rigorous and critical studies of communally situated researchers cannot be undertaken by the members of those very same communities, for in a structurally unjust social order researchers' capacities for critical self-examination are significantly limited by the social positions they occupy, by their stock of situated social experiences, and by the activities in which they are engaged. Drawing on a number of

compelling historical examples, Harding suggests that appropriate studies of existing research communities need to be undertaken "from the perspective of those whose lives have been marginalized by such communities," which means that those who are socially identified and self-identify as members of socially disadvantaged groups need to have opportunities for forming research communities of their own, and for participating in existing communities of inquiry (69). Because certain "assumptions may be invisible or seem inviolable to investigators with similar cultural outlook and social experience, or the same education and training," Walker suggests further that "sound epistemic practice has to look critically at the practices, relations, and background assumptions within its own community," making use of critical strategies that "are self-reflexive, historically informed, and politically sensitive" (Walker 2007, 64-65).

By working to develop more accountable epistemic communities and strongly reflexive epistemic practices, naturalized nonideal theorists aim to articulate normative ideals that are accessible and achievable and that do not reinforce oppressive practices and conditions, but instead "suggest nonhierarchical alternative models for how society might be structured" (Schwartzman 2006, 586). With appropriate models in hand, naturalized nonideal theorists proceed to provide guidance on how "to choose from among the available (i.e., feasible) actions aimed at rectifying the wrongs, repairing the damage, and compensating the losses, as well as dismantling presently operating structures of oppression" (Tessman 2010, 808-809).

2.4.3. Feasible Ideals and Worthy Ideals

Recall that critics of the methodological prioritization of ideal theory argue that ideal theory either fails to provide adequate practical guidance because of excessive idealizing, or else that it offers inappropriate practical guidance because of pernicious idealizing assumptions. A naturalized approach to nonideal theory offers strategies for avoiding and overcoming these problems, for it aims, through appropriately democratic decision-making procedures, to propose feasible ideals and concrete action guidance. However, Tessman worries that by focusing so heavily on the provision of action guidance, naturalized nonideal theory encourages us to be "falsely cheerful about the possibility of moral salvation," either by denying conflicts among a plurality of incommensurable values, or by suggesting that such conflicts can be resolved (say, through cost-benefit analysis or some other consideration of tradeoffs) without uncompensatable loss (789). Drawing from the literature on moral dilemmas, she argues that an approach to nonideal theory that aims exclusively to guide action under unjust circumstances precludes

> acknowledgment that there are irrectifiable wrongs, irreparable damage, and uncompensatable losses, as well as ways in which oppositional acts aimed at challenging (or surviving) some aspect of oppression may conflict (as in a dilemma) with other such acts to produce a situation in which new or continued moral wrongdoing is unavoidable (809).

Although Tessman thinks we must act to resist, challenge, and dismantle structural forms of oppression, and must, therefore, resort to a consideration of tradeoffs among conflicting values, she doubts the possibility of devising "a way to issue action-guiding prescriptions for nonideal, dilemmatic, conditions that are not terrible" (811).

In addition to portraying moral agents as falsely redeemable through their choices and actions, Tessman points out that an exclusively action-guiding approach to nonideal theory "must constrain all normative ideals to those that are attainable under nonideal

conditions, precisely because these are the only kind that can be or ought to be action-guiding" (812). The problem here is that what amounts to an achievable target for political action under oppressive conditions is likely to be very different in character from the loftier ambitions that help motivate people's efforts to survive oppression and commit themselves to dismantling its sustaining structures over the long haul. To mention an iconic example, when Martin Luther King Jr. famously delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, his hopes for what could realistically be accomplished in the near term were doubtless more modest than his vision for creating the beloved community. But if a naturalized approach to nonideal theory only presents "feasible ideals" as objects of aspiration and falsely treats those ideals as right or good, then such a theory risks discouraging people from attending to their own experiences of disappointment in the face of the chasm yawning between the goals that are achievable here and now, and other presently unattainable but "worthy ideals." Tessman warns that downplaying or ignoring this chasm "tends to promote the adaptation of normative expectations to existing possibilities" (812). In order to avoid such an outcome, she suggests that, "We should face unattainable ideals in the same way that we should face the inevitability of moral wrongdoing that characterizes moral dilemmas" (812). To do so is to reserve a place for expectations that remind us viscerally of our own moral failures while not also guiding our actions here and now.

By way of contrast with the Rawlsian conceptualization of nonideal theory, naturalized nonideal theory does not have a strongly transitional aim, for it makes no requirement that the feasible ideals it proposes depend logically on an integrated theoretical ideal of a perfectly just society. Naturalized nonideal theorists do acknowledge, however, that we

do have a conception of justice and various related normative values such they we are able to recognize systemic oppression, domination, marginalization, and so on, as forms of injustice (and not merely as bad manners of bad taste, for example), and to communicate in ways necessary for articulating ideals both feasible and worthy. Naturalized nonideal theorists start from acknowledging actual peoples' lived experiences of injustice and oppression, describing and critically evaluating various aspects and regions of the social order we currently inhabit from the perspectives of differently positioned participants. We identify and diagnose the structural causes of injustice and oppression in the process, before going on to generate normative ideals for the purposes of guiding action and sustaining ambitions over the long haul.[6] Because the circumstances under scrutiny are constantly changing (e.g., unexpected problems are likely to emerge, including unintended consequences of previously implemented policies and courses of action), naturalized nonideal theorists gradually work toward developing loftier objects of aspiration that are continually subject to critical revision, simultaneously working against the adaptation of normative expectations to conditions and ways of life that have already been achieved and are presently achievable.[7] We not start from, nor do we work toward, a well-defined image of a perfect just society. We recognize, instead,

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[6] Some might worry that I am cautioning patience for members of oppressed groups. They might also go on to note the unpopularity of this strategy. However, I do not mean to be suggesting that all anti-oppressive struggles do or ought to take place over a long period of time. Timescales are no doubt variable, depending on such factors as the complexity of the problems at issue, the availability of agents willing to work for relevant changes, and so on. Having said this, I agree with Tessman that in situations where protracted struggles with largely incremental gains seem unavoidable for the foreseeable future, it is of the utmost importance to anticipate and work against the adaptation of expectations to circumstances already achieved or readily achievable, for such adaptation can only further prolong the envisioning and achievement of more worthy goals.

[7] As Elizabeth Anderson puts it, nonideal theory "constructs ideals as hypothesized solutions to the problems identified. Like any hypothesis, ideals may be tested in practice, found to generate new, unanticipated problems when adopted, and thereby require revision. Thus, rather than establishing standards outside of practice, by which practice can be assessed, as in ideal theory, ideals are themselves subject to testing in practice" (Anderson 2009, 135).

that whatever soaring aspirations people are capable of mustering from within currently unjust circumstances are no less subject to critique and revision than are those more modest proposals that are urgently required for guiding action here and now. Because naturalized nonideal theorists conceives of social justice in terms of the elimination of systemic oppression and domination, rather than as the achievement of a particular distribution of goods, we tend to think less in terms of end-state patterns, and to maintain a posture of active listening to others and of vigilant attention to the organization and use of power.[8]

2.5. Complacency in Nonideal Circumstances

What does developing an account of complacency aim to contribute to the much broader field of inquiry known as naturalized nonideal theory? While naturalized nonideal theory is crucial for identifying and diagnosing the structural causes of injustice and oppression, and for recommending strategies for bringing about structural change, its primary focus is on the material and sociohistorical background conditions of action, rather than on the agents who contribute by their actions to the production, reproduction, and reorganization of social structures and institutions. For this reason, naturalized nonideal theory as it has been conceptualized by the theorists I have been discussing, pays relatively little attention to the strengths and limitations of the agents who are called upon to act in response to

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[8] Of course, this is not to suggest that there is no connection between end-state patterns and the elimination of systemic oppression and domination. For example, skewed distributions in income are certainly one indicator of unequal relations of power and influence among social groups; and conversely, participation in processes of collective decision-making (concerning labour conditions, matters of ownership, and so forth) is thought to be crucial for correcting such inequalities, for merely redistributing goods does nothing to alter the morally illegitimate hierarchies of power that contribute to creating unfair distributive patterns in the first place. It is also possible to speak of distributions that are less unfair than others, although such comparative judgments need not presuppose agreement on what is most fair (agreement on any particular end-state pattern, that is).

structural problems. This includes the victims of and resistors to oppression, as well as those who are animating socially dominant roles, or passively accepting the domination of others. Thus, in prescribing strategies and courses of action, naturalized nonideal theory may underestimate the extent to which everyone is morally damaged under exploitative and oppressive social conditions (though in different ways and to different degrees), while also ignoring the fact that particular forms of character damage can prevent agents from taking responsibility for addressing serious structural problems.

For instance, some people are so worn down from their daily efforts to satisfy basic needs that they find themselves unable to muster the energy to form a union with their coworkers and put pressure on their employers for greater workplace autonomy and better wages. Although they are fully aware of calls to unionize, for example, they find it difficult to break out of the patterns of their day-to-day workplace grinds. Meanwhile, some employers have been trained so well to squeeze profits out of tight operating budgets that they have grown indifferent to the lives of their employees, and barely flinch when acting to scale back healthcare benefits and pensions. The point of this brief example is that exploitative relationships in which some agents exercise their capacities under the control, according to the purposes, and for the benefit of others tend to inflict damage on the moral character of everyone involved—that is, on both the exploiters and the exploited. This can make it difficult to actually bring about structural change even when alternative organizational forms are accessible and otherwise seem to be achievable (e.g., unionization, or worker cooperatives). So, if naturalized nonideal theory—or any other type of normative political theory, for that matter—does not take account of the particular forms of character damage inflicted on differently positioned agents, it may end

up offering action guidance that cannot be taken up until the damage has been repaired, if it could be taken up at all. More generally, it will not help us understand what is involved in processes of character repair, and how to think about the relationship between personal and structural transformation in specific contexts of systemic injustice, so it will be incapable of providing adequate practical guidance on its own.

It is important to understand that this is a feature of the methodology of naturalized nonideal theory, which focuses on critically evaluating the norms embedded in various social practices and institutions, and on recognizing, imagining, articulating, and sometimes creating alternative arrangements from scratch. Thus, relative inattention to the significance of character damage is not just a signal feature of bad or incompletely worked out naturalized nonideal theory, but of naturalized nonideal theory as such. Having said this, some might wonder whether naturalistic investigation of, for example, the causes of the 2008 global economic collapse might not find the problem to be traceable to the corrupt characters and malicious intentions of Wall Street bankers and financiers, rather than to the practices of banking and finance in any particular region, or as manifested within the institutions of neoliberal capitalism in the United States and globally. These readers might point to particular bankers' callous flirtations with investment strategies of dubious legality as the main drivers of the deepening impoverishment of hundreds of millions of people, which doubtless contribute to their being oppressed. I would agree that it is largely an empirical question whether the economic collapse was caused mainly or primarily by the immorality of specific agents, as opposed to the underlying norms of banking practice and the financialization of capitalism (though mixed results are entirely possible as well—and incomplete or

unsatisfying ones, to be expected). Naturalized nonideal theory will be useful insofar as these norms are found to be causally implicated in processes that reproduce or result in systemic oppression, domination, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, violence, or cultural imperialism. Other normative theories are needed to evaluate the specific agents involved.

My suggestion, then, is that an account of complacency, among other forms of what I call "motivational vices," would contribute to naturalized nonideal theory by providing an indispensable form of normative guidance. By focusing on the agents who are called upon to act in response to injustice in specific contexts, and by helping us to understand what it means to be complacent with respect to injustice in these contexts, such an account would put us in a better position to go to work on remedying our own complacency as well as that of others. As I will explain in Chapter 3, Robin S. Dillon's work on "critical character theory," which is heavily indebted to Tessman's "feminist eudaimonism" and her account of "burdened virtues" (Dillon 2012; Tessman 2005, 2009), is a good place to start when it comes to elaborating an account of complacency. Indeed, I think critical character theory ought to be understood as a necessary part of a much broader field of liberatory thought and practice. Work conducted in this broader field seeks to identify and understand not only (a) the social and material conditions for oppressive structures and (b) how these structures can be dismantled, but also (c) the systemic sources of various forms of character damage, (d) how particular forms limit the ability and willingness of individuals to support efforts aimed at dismantling oppressive structures, and (e) the costs exacted to character in the process of engaging in or resisting liberatory struggles. It is to these latter three tasks that we shall turn in Chapters 3 and 4.

3. Epistemologies of Ignorance and Complacency

> White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society. The comfortable, the entrenched, the privileged cannot continue to tremble at the prospect of change in the status quo.
>
> - Martin Luther King Jr.

3.1. Introduction

Why do racism and racial oppression persist in so-called "developed" countries such as the United States? Why do so many white people, among others, continue to think, feel, and act in racist ways? And why are more whites not motivated to go to work against racial oppression? I take it that these questions are closely related to one another. A plausible answer to each is that *ignorance* is a significant contributing factor—specifically, ignorance with respect to the matters of race, racism, and white privilege.

With these thoughts in mind, recent philosophical work on the "epistemology of ignorance" has considerably advanced discussion of the persistence of racism and racial oppression in the United States and elsewhere. The epistemology of ignorance is an examination of the complex phenomena of ignorance. It aims to identify different forms of ignorance, to understand how they are produced and maintained, and to specify what roles they play in knowledge practices. The contributors to a recent volume entitled *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Sullivan & Tuana 2007) focus on an especially pervasive form of ignorance that has been linked to white supremacy throughout modern

history and in the contemporary United States: namely, what Charles W. Mills calls "white ignorance" (Mills 1997, 1998, 2007).

In this chapter I bring recent efforts to apply lessons from an epistemology of ignorance to the matters of race, racism, and white privilege into conversation with an emerging field of inquiry known as "critical character theory" (Dillon 2012; Tessman 2005, 2009). Because I am interested in understanding the phenomenon of complacency, it will be important for me to consider whether and to what extent complacency is constituted by certain forms of ignorance, and whether it is, or is in part, an epistemic vice. Simply put, is complacency with respect to racism and racial oppression basically the same thing as what Mills calls "white ignorance"? And should we expect processes of "undoing" white ignorance to be equivalent to the "shattering" or "overcoming" of complacency of this kind? To anticipate the central contention of the present chapter, I will argue that the answer to both of these questions is no, although white ignorance is a related problem and does play a role in sustaining complacency. While arguing for this claim I hope to show that examining the phenomenon of complacency through the lens of critical character theory can help to further advance discussion of the persistence of racism and racial oppression by foregrounding what is not easily seen when we are focusing solely or primarily on white ignorance. The epistemology of ignorance and critical character theory contribute mutually informing insights to broader efforts aimed at reducing and ultimately ending racial oppression, as well as other interlocking forms of structural, group-based oppression. Or so I shall argue.

I proceed as follows. In Section 3.2 I offer an overview of the pertinent literature on white ignorance, focusing in particular on the work of Mills. In Section 3.3 I introduce a complex case study in which many whites seem to have a considerable amount of explicit, propositional knowledge concerning the mass incarceration of people of color under the auspices of the so-called "War on Drugs," and yet are still, by and large, not motivated to inquire into, seek better understanding of, and take responsibility for dismantling this oppressive system. I summarize the analysis of mass incarceration Michele Alexander offers in *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander 2012) before going on to focus on how the themes of ignorance, knowledge, and knowers are depicted in both the form and the content of her book. Then, in Section 3.4, I explore an emerging field of inquiry known as critical character theory. I offer an overview of the subject matter, aims, and methodology of critical character theory, and then discuss how examining the phenomenon of complacency through this theoretical lens can help to further advance discussion of the persistence of racism and racial oppression by foregrounding what is not easily seen when we are focusing solely or primarily on white ignorance. Finally, in Section 3.5 I conclude by summarizing the points to be carried forward to the next chapter, where I will continue to flesh out my account of complacency in the broader context of global climate change.

3.2. White Ignorance

What exactly is "white ignorance," and how is it produced and maintained? In his earlier book, *The Racial Contract,* Mills describes white ignorance as "a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of all social realities," and he

suggests that this model is rooted in "the cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement" (Mills 1997, 18-19). According to Mills, the "Racial Contract" historically underwriting the unimaginably inhumane though economically lucrative (for some) projects of conquest, colonization, and enslavement was, and in many ways, still is held in place by the socialization of its "signatories" into distinctive epistemic communities. Community membership is premised on an implicitly established consensus concerning what count as acceptable patterns of perceptual attentiveness and practices of belief formation, the products of which are systematically distorted representations of the communities in question, of community members themselves, and of broader social realities. For example, many European settler-colonizers in the Americas tended to think of themselves as members of highly cultured, spiritually and morally upright communities, who were charged with the tasks of civilizing "savage, culturally backward" indigenous peoples "for their own good," and of putting enslaved Africans to work on the cultivation and extraction of natural resources and minerals for the advancement of their global empires. Today, many white Americans continue to believe that global poverty is disconnected from the accumulation of capital in the West, that the United States serves as a model for "economic development" suitably exported to all other countries, and that the United States is basically a just society, or at least the best of all possible social, economic, and political arrangements. Mills suggests that distortions of these kinds were and still are based more in the imaginations of those responsible for their production and in what facilitates psychologically and socially functional ways of living *for them* than they are in matters of fact. Loyalty to these misrepresentations is supported and enforced through a constant

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barrage of subtle and not-so-subtle cultural pressures, which effectively ensure that large groups of otherwise capable knowers will manage to live out their lives in a "racial fantasyland, a 'consensual hallucination'" (18). The ironic outcome of all of this is that "whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (18).

Mills further elaborates the features and dynamics of this pernicious cognitive phenomenon in a more recent piece entitled "White Ignorance" (Mills 2007). He begins by situating his own efforts to explain and account for white ignorance in the context of recent moves away from the individualist focus of modern mainstream Anglo-American epistemology, and toward the development of a naturalized social epistemology informed primarily by the work of feminist philosophers and critical philosophers of race (Mills 2007, 13-17). As Mills points out, these latter developments are especially crucial in light of the lamentable tendency in recent social epistemology to "presuppose a degree of consent and inclusion" among and within communities of knowers "that does not exist outside the imagination of mainstream scholars" (15; see, e.g., Kornblith 1994ab; Goldman 1999). Indeed, feminist epistemologists have been concerned for some time now with figuring out what can and cannot be known from various subject locations and situations, denying that anyone, anywhere, can know anything in the same way as differently situated others (Code 1987, 1991, 2006; Haraway 1991, 1997; Harding 1986, 1991, 2004; Hartsock 1998). Recognizing the often divisive, conflictual, and sometimes outright antagonistic character of epistemic practices in hierarchically organized societies, an epistemology of ignorance examines the variety of ways in which particular communities of knowers are limited in what they can know, as well as how they more or

less actively engage in processes of coming not to know, or of unlearning what was once known, in some cases with politically disastrous consequences.

Examining contemporary productions and manifestations of ignorance through the lens of a naturalized social epistemology is a complicated undertaking. It involves inquiring into the intersections between structural economic and social arrangements, the variegated and shifting modes of self- and social-identification produced under these arrangements, and the cognitive norms established among diverse communities of knowers. One of the central contentions motivating this line of inquiry is that widespread ignorance of multiple, interlocking forms of structural, group-based oppression cannot be explained as a product of a lack of access to information or resources for acquiring knowledge, nor can it be explained as a result of epistemic oversights due to the strains of daily life and limited time. As noted by feminist philosopher Lorraine Code, an inquiry of this sort presupposes recognition of the fact that "knowers are always *somewhere*—and at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations" (Code 1993, 39). Its guiding aim is to develop a "geography of the epistemic terrain" through qualitative analyses of diverse subject locations, determining the epistemic advantages and disadvantages accruing to diverse communities of knowers both in relation to particular lines of inquiry, and also in virtue of their social positions and identities *per se* (39; see also Harding 1991; Alcoff 2007, 40-47; Code 2006).

Mills' analysis is distinguished by the fact that it seeks to explain and account for white ignorance as a product of the *substantive cognitive practices* which socially dominant knowers engage in within the context of a racially oppressive social order—rather than

focusing exclusively on the situated experiences, interests, and motivations for engaging in critical inquiry, which such knowers typically lack or have in short supply (Alcoff 2007, 47-50). In her commentary on Mills' work, Linda Martin Alcoff notes that, "If it is true that most people prefer to think of themselves as moral or at least excusable in their actions, then in unjust societies those in dominant and privileged positions must be able to construct representations of themselves and others to support a fantasyland of moral approbation," effectively "duping themselves about the true nature of their social world" (Alcoff 2007, 49; 50). Although the focus of much of the writing on the epistemology of ignorance has so far been on white ignorance and its relationship to white supremacy, Mills' analysis can be understood as a contribution to the much broader project of examining various forms of ignorance in relation to multiple, interlocking forms of structural, group-based oppression (e.g., male, straight, cisgendered, youthful, aged, able-bodied, and settler ignorance, as well as middle, upper, and ruling class ignorance).

It is worth noting that Mills uses the term "ignorance" to "cover both false belief and the absence of true belief," (16) which is to say that he is interested primarily in explicit, propositional forms of ignorance and knowledge. Having said this, he also takes for granted that analyzing a particular form of ignorance involves identifying the causal mechanisms involved in its production, maintenance, and enforcement. Mills argues that white ignorance is not a contingent cognitive phenomenon in contexts such as the contemporary United States, but rather a product of "racialized causality" of two analytically and empirically distinct types. On the one hand, white ignorance can come about as a *direct* effect of the overtly racist motivations of particular white cognizers. For example, we might think here of Archie Bunker, the curmudgeonly patriarch of "All in

the Family" sitcom fame.[9] Bunker believes that blacks as a group are inherently different from and inferior to whites, and he is not shy about expressing his views on the topic. Although biological theories of racial difference were falsified several decades prior to Bunker's primetime debut, the "self-made man" narrative he insists on telling about himself tacitly affirms the biological superiority of whites while denying the oppressive social and material conditions under which many people of color live in the United States, and it does so in a way that insulates supporting claims from empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. As Mills would put it, Bunker's overtly racist attitudes and stubborn determination to protect an inflated self-image leave him "*aprioristically intent on denying*" what is before him, precluding a "veridical perception of nonwhites" and serving as "a categorical barrier against their equitable moral treatment" (Mills 2007, 27, original emphasis).

On the other hand, Mills argues that it is not the case that every manifestation of white ignorance comes about as a result of explicitly held racist motivations, for white ignorance can also come about as an *indirect* effect of social-structural causes that operate even on those who are not self-consciously or openly racist. Indeed, as Mills notes in *Blackness Visible*, "Perhaps even more important than ideologies at the explicit and articulated level (for example, libertarianism, biological determinism) are ideologies in the more primeval sense of underlying patterns and matrices of belief, or ideology as 'common sense'" (Mills 1998, 34; on "racialized common sense," see also Goldberg

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[9] I borrow this example from Linda Martin Alcoff. She writes: "If we can generalize from Archie, then we might conjecture that racism produces a pattern of perceptual attentiveness to the world that relegates some significant aspects of it to a murky nether region. Racism can also supply premises—and cast these as unchallengeable premises—that lead to judgments for which otherwise there is insufficient evidence. Thus racism is a type of subjectivity that forms patterns of perceptual attentiveness and supplies belief-influencing premises that result in a distorted and faulty account of reality" (Alcoff 2007, 48).

1993, Lubiano 1997ab, Sullivan 2006, Shotwell 2011). For example, we might think here of Samantha, a white New York City police officer who proudly claims to be "colorblind" in conformity with the official creed, and is quick to remind everyone of the black friends she had back in college.[10] Although Samantha makes a sincere effort to see everyone "just as a human being" and does not espouse any racially prejudiced beliefs, her performance records show that she stopped-and-frisked twice as many blacks as whites on suspicion of drug possession while walking the beat over the last month, even after her partner told her that the sale and use of illegal drugs is in fact just as common among whites living in the neighbourhood. People of color living in the area are not surprised by Samantha's behaviour. They are, however, suspicious of all this "colorblind" talk, especially given how long the mayor's office and NYPD spokespeople have been using it to dismiss their protests of racially biased law enforcement practices.

Because Mills situates at least some of the mechanisms responsible for producing and maintaining white ignorance on the macro, social-structural level (as opposed to the micro, physico-biological level), he recognizes the need to historicize white ignorance, while also understanding race and various racial categories through the lens of a variant of social constructivism that is compatible with the social (as opposed to biological) reality of race. This means appreciating, for example, that since the racial category "white" is a rather recent invention in human history that has evolved and expanded its scope over time—bound up as it is with the dispossession of indigenous peoples of their lands, the founding legal institutions of the United States (e.g., property law), the forced servitude of those of African descent under the institution of chattel slavery, and the

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[10] This is not Mills' example, but my own, which I have chosen largely for the sake of continuity with the discussion of mass incarceration to come in later sections of this chapter.

gradual inclusion of various non-Anglo ethnicities under its banner (see, e.g., Harris 1993; Frederickson 2002)—it would not make sense to explain the behaviour of, say, ancient Athenian slave-owners in terms of *white* ignorance, even though this group may well have been ignorant in other, comparably disastrous respects (see, e.g., Walker 2007, Ch. 7).

Situating some of the mechanisms for the production of white ignorance at the social-structural level also implies that indirect racialized causality may have varying degrees of influence on differently situated populations—depending, for example, on other dimensions of social location and identity, such as class, gender, and sexuality. This suggests, first, that white ignorance is not confined to white people, but may also be manifested among blacks and other people of color.[11] For example, it may turn out that Samantha's partner, Alex, manifests similar patterns of performance while walking the beat, having been brought up in a similar neighbourhood as Samantha and trained in the same police academy, even though he is of Caribbean descent and is a socially- and self-identified black man. Second, the polymorphous influence of indirect racial causality also suggests that not all white people will manifest ignorance of this particular form, nor will those who do manifest it be condemned to. Admittedly, white ignorance may seem

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[11] Some might find this suggestion controversial, or at least counterintuitive. To be clear, Mills claims that white ignorance "will often be shared by nonwhites to a greater or lesser extent because of the power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony involved. (This is a familiar point from the Marxist and feminist traditions—working-class conservatives, "male-identified" women, endorsing right-wing and sexist ideologies against their interests.) *Provided that the causal route is appropriate, blacks can manifest white ignorance also*" (Mills 2007, 22, my emphasis). I take it that whatever remaining controversy there may be here is likely to stem, in part, from the phrase "white ignorance"—as in, how could *blacks* manifest *white* ignorance? Yet recall that Mills espouses a variant of social constructivism concerning race and various racial categories. Perhaps the controversy would be better framed in terms of the relationships (compatibilities, tensions, and so forth) between processes of racial formation during certain periods and in specific circumstances (e.g., at the turn of the twenty-first century in urban Los Angeles), and the various epistemic practices bound up with the production of white ignorance—as in, when and where is it possible for socially and self-identified black people to still be in the grips of ignorance in Mills' proposed sense?

indefeasible in Samantha's case because of her role in local law enforcement practices, and even more so in the case of Bunker because of his stubborn demeanor and recalcitrant attitudes. Nevertheless, Mills suggests that white ignorance "is best thought of as a cognitive tendency—an inclination, a doxastic disposition—which is not insuperable" (23).

It is important to note that the point of Mills' analysis is not merely to *characterize* white ignorance and to *diagnose* it as a particularly recalcitrant problem. His aim in applying the lessons from an epistemology of ignorance to the matters of race, racism, and white privilege is not only to arrive at a more adequate understanding of "how certain social structures tend to promote these crucially flawed processes," but also "how to personally extricate oneself from them (insofar as that is possible)," as well as how "to do one's part in undermining them in the broader cognitive sphere" (23). Indeed, Mills sees the project of mapping an epistemology of ignorance as "a preliminary to reformulating an epistemology that will give us genuine knowledge" (16). He also emphasizes that white ignorance is to be a concept "broad enough to include moral ignorance—not merely ignorance of facts *with* moral implications but moral non-knowings, incorrect judgments about the rights and wrongs of moral situations themselves" (22). Thus, he calls for further efforts aimed at naturalizing and socializing *moral* epistemology, pointing out some promising work already begun in this field of inquiry (Campbell & Hunter 2000; see also Walker 2003, 2007).

Given the sheer pervasiveness and persistence of white ignorance, it is not surprising that Mills is optimistic about what processes of undoing and extricating ourselves from

dysfunctional cognitive practices should yield. Of particular interest from the perspective of my own project is his claim that "improvements in our cognitive practice should have a practical payoff" in two respects: first, "in heightened sensitivity to social oppression"; and second, in "the attempt to reduce and ultimately eliminate that oppression" (22). Of course, the work of actually dealing with the problem of white ignorance has been and is likely to continue to be incredibly difficult, first and most obviously because of resistance—not just stubbornness, but outright aggression—on the part of those who have been socialized into dysfunctional epistemic practices, and in significant respects constituted by their participation in these practices. Mills suggests a twin-pronged strategy here: on the one hand, efforts need to be made to disseminate and mainstream revisionist counter-histories that challenge the whitewashed versions of American history currently taught in schools (public, private, charter, post-secondary) and enshrined in public monuments, not to mention pervasive Eurocentric myths and myths of American exceptionalism and superiority. On the other hand, programs of cognitive reform need to be undertaken and worked through both individually and in more interactive, communal settings. As Mills puts it, "Only by starting to break these rules and meta-rules"—that is, both the dysfunctional cognitive norms in question, as well as the norms of mainstream individualist epistemology that continue to keep them hidden from view—"can we begin the long process that will lead to the eventual overcoming of this white darkness and the achievement of an enlightenment that is genuinely multiracial" (35).

Mills claims that addressing the problem of white ignorance is a preliminary to the achievement of a multiracial enlightenment, and that such enlightenment should have significant effects on the behaviour, activities, and practices of those who have grown

accustomed to living under the blissful shadow of white darkness. His thought seems to be this: given that the problem of white ignorance lies in the substantive cognitive practices implemented within certain communities of knowers (rather than in the social locations and identities of those knowers *per se*), processes of identifying these dysfunctional practices, understanding how they operate, seeking to distance ourselves from them, and correcting them through revisionist counter-histories and cognitive reform should have other than purely cognitive payoffs, the reach of which extend into the practical spheres of morally and politically motivated action.

3.3. Mass Incarceration and White Ignorance

In light of Mills' analysis of white ignorance, in this section I would now like to introduce a case study where many whites seem to have a considerable amount of explicit, propositional knowledge concerning the mass incarceration of people of color under the auspices of the so-called "War on Drugs," and yet are still, by and large, not motivated to inquire into, seek better understanding of, and take responsibility for dismantling this oppressive system. I begin in Section 3.3.1 by offering a summary of Michele Alexander's analysis of mass incarceration in *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander 2012), before going on in Section 3.3.2 to focus on how the themes of ignorance, knowledge, and knowers are depicted in both the form and the content of her book.

3.3.1. Mass Incarceration

In *The New Jim Crow*, civil rights lawyer and legal scholar Michele Alexander argues that with the rise to prominence of "tough on crime" policies during the 1970s, and the

subsequent launch of the so-called "War on Drugs" during the 1980s, the American

criminal justice and penal systems have emerged as a system of social control comparable

in many respects to the institutions of chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Indeed,

Alexander sees fit to describe the mass incarceration of people of color as a "new racial

caste system." In addition to documenting the fact that two million black men were

locked away in prisons at the turn of the twenty-first century, Alexander explains how the

criminal justice and penal systems currently works to create an "undercaste" of branded

felons numbering in the millions, overwhelmingly people of color, who are left with

heavy debt burdens, denied many basic rights and privileges of American citizenship, and

permanently relegated to the margins of society with inferior status designation:

> Young black men today may be just as likely to suffer discrimination in
> employment, housing, public benefits, and jury service as a black man in the
> Jim Crow era—discrimination that is perfectly legal because it is based on
> one's criminal record (Alexander 2012, 180-181).

Alexander presents these disturbing realities as evidence of how racism and racial

oppression have evolved in response to the challenges posed by the Civil Rights

movement of the 1960s, documenting how the rules and regulations of the basic structure

of American society have been adapted to an officially "colorblind" political climate

which discourages explicit references to race in the law and in public discourse. Although

legal institutions have changed significantly in the United States over the past fifty or so

years, and these changes have been justified through the use of new rhetoric and

language, many of the same results continue to be produced, effectively ensuring the

perpetuation of racial hierarchy and the preservation of white privilege.

How did mass incarceration emerge historically as a racialized system of social control? According to Alexander, the design and emergence of this system required the expenditure of a considerable amount of financial and political resources by the "most ardent proponents of racial hierarchy" in the United States (21). These expenditures were aimed primarily at convincing certain segments of the American public of the need for law enforcement agencies to launch an ambitious War on Drugs, and to open up legal avenues for executing a war of this kind. Particularly under the Reagan and Bush administrations, but also extending well into the Clinton years and beyond, "Media campaigns were waged; politicians blasted "soft" judges and enacted harsh sentencing laws; poor people of color were vilified," (181) continually reinforcing the imperatives to "crack down on drugs" and to show less mercy in the courts for those allegedly engaged in illegal drug activities. The vilification of young black men was crucial to winning over public support for the drug war, for as with wars of all sorts, this war needed an enemy— and yet, drug crimes (the use and sale of illegal narcotics) were and still are just as common, if not more so, among white Americans as they are among nonwhites (98-100). Alexander contends that, "It was the conflation of blackness and crime in the media and political discourse that made the drug war and the sudden, massive expansion of our prison system possible," (207) for this ideological maneuver tacitly assured the American public that only certain neighborhoods and certain people would be targeted in efforts to ramp up the enforcement of drug laws. The conflation of blackness and criminality "did not happen organically," she argues. Rather, "it was constructed by political and media elites" (200) as part of an effort to exploit and reinforce the vulnerabilities, stereotypes, and racial resentments of many whites, especially the poor, working poor, and working

classes, who were especially nervous about the implications of the Civil Rights movement and anxious not to end up on the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. On Alexander's view, the conflation of blackness and criminality also worked to define the meaning of race in the late twentieth-century United States, inasmuch as it constructed black people, and especially young black men, as criminals—and vice versa, for in the public imagination the figure of "the criminal" became a young black man, much as "the welfare recipient" has become a single woman of color with children, "the immigrants" a family of Mexican origin, and "the terrorist," a young Arab man (see Davis 2012, 42-43).

Thus, the term "criminal" (tacitly a synonym for the nearly redundant term, "black criminal") came to designate a public enemy, providing "a legitimate outlet to the expression of antiblack resentment and animus—a convenient release valve now that explicit forms of racial bias are strictly condemned" (199). In the 1980s and 90s, politicians, judges, local and state law enforcement agencies, as well as large portions of the American public, could come to a virtual consensus that it made sense to prioritize the pursuit and prosecution of users and sellers of illegal drugs. With a swell in media representations of criminals in news reports, television shows, and movies (think here, for example, of shows like *Cops* and *Law and Order*), relatively few would vocally dissent from the propositions that crime is a pressing and urgent problem in the United States, particularly drug crimes and the violence surrounding them, and that criminals ought to be punished with impunity, especially those involved in the trafficking of illegal narcotics.

However, Alexander suggests that it was not just the racial resentments of whites and the racialization of criminals that led to widespread support for "tough on crime" policies. Many people of color have supported these policies as well, including blacks living in impoverished areas, in some cases out of a widely shared fear of young black men. But that is only part of the story. As Alexander explains,

> In the era of mass incarceration, poor African Africans are not given the option of great schools, community investment, and job training. Instead, they are offered police and prisons. If the only choice that is offered blacks is rampant crime or more prisons, the predictable (and understandable) answer will be "more prisons" (210).

Hence, in the officially "colorblind" political climate of the post-Civil Rights era, and with popular support for the War on Drugs among a critical mass of whites and nonwhites, the conditions were in place for shifts in law enforcement priorities and tactics, the enactment of harsher sentencing laws, and the construction of ever more prisons to house the growing numbers of mostly black and brown people being swept into the criminal justice system. Whether imprisoned, incarcerated, or simply arrested, charged, and released on probation or parole, millions of people of color have been placed under correctional control under the auspices of a seemingly endless War on Drugs.

How exactly does the criminal justice system work to imprison hundreds of thousands of people of color, simultaneously creating a massive racialized undercaste? Alexander offers a detailed, multi-level analysis of the legal dimensions of mass incarceration that can only be briefly outlined here. Contrary to popular myths and the purported aims of politicians, she argues that the War on Drugs has not worked to topple major drug dealers, kingpins, and other especially violent participants in the trafficking of narcotics.

Nor have law enforcement agencies been concerned primarily with ridding the streets of especially dangerous drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of those who have been imprisoned are not major producers or distributors of illegal narcotics, nor do they have violent histories. Most arrests have been for drug possession—principally of marijuana, which accounted for nearly 80% of the growth of arrests during the 1990s. "Although the majority of illegal drug users and dealers nationwide are white," adds Alexander, "three-fourths of all people imprisoned for drug offenses have been black or Latino" (98).

The disproportionate number of people of color who have ended up in prisons supports the persistence of two further myths: first, that impoverished urban neighbourhoods are the epicenters for illegal drug use and sales in the United States; and, second, that the dramatic growth in prison populations is due to an increase in crime rates, especially among young black men. Yet Alexander marshals an impressive array of evidence in support of her claim that it has been "changes in laws and policies, not changes in crime rates," that have "been responsible for the growth of our prison system" (93). Arrest and conviction rates are largely a function of *where* law enforcement agencies concentrate their efforts to enforce drug laws, what *financial incentives* and *political stakes* have led them to set their priorities and concentrate their efforts and surveillance in which places, and what *legal mechanisms* are at their disposal for waging the War on Drugs. As Alexander explains, "In every state across our nation, African Americans—particularly in the poorest neighborhoods—are subjected to tactics and practices that would result in public outrage and scandal if committed in middle-class white neighborhoods" (98). Not only is it politically more feasible for police to effectively occupy impoverished urban

neighborhoods, but in the 1980s large federal grants were offered to law enforcement agencies to encourage the prioritization of drug-law enforcement and to ramp up the number of drug arrests. These grants were paired with the provision of vehicles, equipment, and weaponry for the creation of increasingly militarized units such as Special Weapons and Tactics Teams (SWAT), which are now deployed routinely. As a further financial incentive, policy shifts granted law enforcement agencies the authority to seize and keep all cash, property, and other assets allegedly associated with illegal drug activity, whether or not the owners of said assets ever end up being charged with a crime. Under these operating conditions, Alexander points out that law enforcement agencies at every level have been given "a direct pecuniary interest in the profitability and longevity of the drug war" (83). Meanwhile, with the enactment of laws authorizing police to "stop-and-frisk" pedestrians on reasonable suspicion and without probable cause; to conduct "consent searches" that are seldom refused in practice; and to engage motorists in "pretext stops" to search vehicles for drugs without needing to cite evidence of illegal drug activity, there are few legal rules in place to meaningfully constrain the exercise of police discretion. Agents of law enforcement have effectively been given free reign to act on the basis of whatever racial stereotypes and biases they may consciously hold or embody as "common sense" (61-70).

Because law enforcement agencies have a strong pecuniary interest in prosecuting the drug war, and since they have been given extraordinary discretion regarding where to concentrate their efforts as well as whom to stop, search, charge, and arrest on suspicion of drug crimes, the door has been opened for tremendous racial disparities in who ends up being swept into the criminal justice system. Once "inside" the system, Alexander notes

that "people are often denied attorneys or meaningful representation and pressured into plea bargains by the threat of unbelievably harsh sentences—sentences for minor drug crimes that are higher than many countries impose on convicted murderers" (89). As a result of harsh mandatory minimums and "three-strikes-and-you're-out" laws, it is "not uncommon for people to receive prison sentences of more than fifty years for minor crimes" (91). Whether or not they are imprisoned for especially lengthy periods, those who are branded felons are placed under the formal control of the criminal justice system, which leaves them subject to state surveillance once "out" on probation or parole. The trappings of the felon label effectively make convicts into "second-class citizens," stripped of the right to vote and faced with numerous other civic and social sanctions, which Alexander summarizes as follows:

> Barred from public housing by law, discriminated against by private landlords, ineligible for food stamps, forced to "check the box" indicating a felony conviction on employment applications for nearly every job, and denied licenses for a wide range of professions, people whose only crime is a drug addiction or possession of a small amount of drugs for recreational use find themselves locked out of the mainstream society and economy— permanently (94).

To make matters worse, now that the Supreme Court has "closed the doors to claims of racial bias at every stage of the criminal justice process, from stops and searches to plea bargains and sentencing," (139) those who are imprisoned, branded felons, and subjected to "civil death" have been left without meaningful recourse to challenge racial disparities in the workings of the criminal justice system.

In summary: by exploiting the widespread permissibility of intolerance and hatred for criminals, and by playing on the conflation of blackness and criminality, a formally colorblind criminal justice system has managed to achieve racially discriminatory results,

placing millions of people of color in prisons and under correctional control while

immunizing itself, for all practical purposes, from claims of racial bias. "What is most

concerning about the new racial caste system," claims Alexander, "is that it may prove to

be more durable than its predecessors. Because this new system is not explicitly based on

race, it is easier to defend on seemingly neutral grounds" (184). As she points out, "most

people assume that racism, and racial systems generally, are a function of attitudes"

(183). While the transformation of the American criminal justice and penal systems may

well have been motivated, in part, by the exploitation and reinforcement of racist attitudes

and stereotypes, and while police have been given free reign to enact whatever racist

motivations they may hold, unwittingly or otherwise, Alexander urges her readers to

come to grips with the reality that this system now operates largely through

institutionalized forms of racism that are not recognized as such under the law, but which

nevertheless produce disastrous results, perpetuating racial hierarchy and preserving

white privilege in the United States:

> Because mass incarceration is officially colorblind, it seems inconceivable
> that the system could function like a racial caste system. The widespread and
> mistaken belief that racial animus is necessary for the creation and
> maintenance of racialized systems of control is the most important reason that
> we, as a nation, have remained in deep denial (183).[12]

What matters in the case of this particular system of social control are a tangled web of

law enforcement priorities and practices, incentive schemes, sentencing laws, and so

forth, as well as a supportive political climate and quiescent attitudes among certain

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[12] Note the qualification here: an "officially" colorblind system need not *actually*, by that dint, be colorblind. I take it that Alexander's point is not that the criminal justice system and mass incarceration *are* free of "racial animus" in its many varieties (that is, that none of the participants in this system have or express racist beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, and so forth, whether "explicit" or "implicit"—a curious dichotomy, at any rate), but rather that even if it *were* free of such animus, it would *still* function as a racialized system of social control that works to reproduce racial hierarchy and preserve white privilege in the United States.

segments of the American populace. Taken singly, these laws, incentives, and practices may not have been instituted for the explicit purpose of putting millions of people of color under correctional control and relegating them to the margins of society. Nevertheless, for decades they have, and indeed, still do operate in tandem to trap scores of black and brown men "at the bottom of a racial hierarchy," (184) effectively banishing them "to a political and social space not unlike Jim Crow" (58).

3.3.2. Ignorance, Knowledge, and Knowers in *The New Jim Crow*

I would now like to consider how the themes of ignorance, knowledge, and knowers are articulated in *The New Jim Crow*, both in the form of the book as a work of writing, and in the content of the analysis Alexander presents to her readers. In the process of so doing I will chart several connections between Alexander's analysis of mass incarceration and Mills' analysis of white ignorance. I am fascinated by the way Alexander writes both with and against the grain of white ignorance, anticipating a diverse audience of knowers who are presumed to already possess various kinds and levels of knowledge, while also explicitly depicting what these knowers do and do not know in the substance of her writing. I take it that one of the central aims of *The New Jim Crow* is to contribute to the undoing of white ignorance in the United States and elsewhere, and that, along with Mills and myself, Alexander sees great promise in working toward the achievement of a multiracial enlightenment.

The first thing worth noting with respect to the themes of ignorance, knowledge, and knowers in *The New Jim Crow* is that the book has a complex pedagogical aim. Alexander addresses specific communities of knowers whom she anticipates will for the

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most part be ignorant of the systemic nature of the phenomena she sets out to describe, explain, and account for, and for whom she endeavours to serve as an authoritative teacher. As a number of commentators have pointed out, *The New Jim Crow* is explicitly aimed at a particular range of audiences. Alexander works to address these audiences on their own respective cognitive terms (or at least on what she imagines those terms to be), anticipating what they will and will not already know about the complex histories of racism and racial oppression in the United States (see, e.g., Osel 2012; Thomas 2012). She begins in the preface with the admission that, "This book is not for everyone." Rather, she has "a specific audience in mind—people who care deeply about racial justice but who, for any number of reasons, do not yet appreciate the magnitude of the crisis faced by communities of color as a result of mass incarceration." Thus, part of the project of her book is to inform and educate a community of knowers whom she expects to be quite sympathetic to the cause of reducing and ultimately eliminating racial oppression, yet to also be largely ignorant of the existence and character of one particularly prominent form of racial oppression in the United States. Presumably their ignorance stems in part from the fact that these communities have *not* been targeted for mass incarceration or directly confronted with its disastrous results. Apparently, then, the first audience Alexander hopes to reach is one comprised primarily of white people, among others who are most likely to be in the grips of what Mills calls white ignorance.[13] Hence, her book can plausibly be understood as a contribution to undoing the white ignorance of this group.

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[13] Notice, however, that Alexander does not identify any of her audiences through the use of racial markers.

Yet Alexander goes on to note that she is also writing "for another audience." She supposes that this second audience has "lacked the facts and data to back up their claims" when attempting to persuade others that "something is eerily familiar about the way our criminal justice system operates." Presumably this more attuned and sensitive group of knowers is comprised, in part, of people whose communities *have* been targeted by and directly confronted with the disastrous results of mass incarceration, and who are, for these reasons, interested in acquiring a more adequate understanding of how this "new racial caste system" has emerged, how it currently works, and how to discuss these disturbing realities with others. Apparently, then, the second audience Alexander hopes to reach is made up primarily of people of color, some of whom are already well informed on the topic of mass incarceration, but who could perhaps stand to benefit from her analysis while potentially benefitting others. Alexander writes to everyone in this second audience that she hopes her book "empowers you and allows you to speak your truth with greater conviction, credibility, and courage."

Finally, Alexander notes that she is also writing, "for all those trapped within America's latest caste system"—a group whom she addresses without making any suggestions concerning what they do and do not know about mass incarceration. She assures those who are presently incarcerated or otherwise under correctional control that "you are not forgotten," presenting her book as a gift of memory with political as well as theoretical value. In summary, then, *The New Jim Crow* is addressed to three specific communities of knowers whose stock of social experiences and core belief sets the author anticipates will differ significantly—depending on, among other things, the extent to which they have been targeted and/or affected in some way by mass incarceration. Alexander

endeavours to inform and educate the first two audiences especially, audiences whom she supposes to be in a condition of ignorance relative to her.

With these thoughts in mind, the second thing worth noting about the themes of ignorance and knowledge in *The New Jim Crow* is the way Alexander represents herself in the text as a knower, and how she depicts her own personal history of having been ignorant of the new racial caste system and then gradually coming to know about it. For example, in the preface she situates herself in relation to her first audience (those who "do not yet appreciate the magnitude of the crisis faced by communities of color as a result of mass incarceration") when she notes that, "I am writing this book for people like me—the person I was ten years ago." In other words, at one point in her life Alexander was in many respects as ignorant as members of the predominantly white group she hopes to reach. But now, after years of work and reflection as a civil rights lawyer and advocate, she has managed to undo her own ignorance. Now, perhaps this is mostly just a clever way of preparing white readers for a book-length process of coming to grips with the disturbing realities of racism, racial oppression, and white privilege in the United States (as if to say: "as I have come to know, so too, presumably, can you"). Nevertheless, Alexander returns to the topic of her own former ignorance, focusing on the dramatic shift in perspective and focus she has undergone over the years:

> For me, the new caste system is now as obvious as my own face in the mirror. Like an optical illusion—one in which the embedded image is impossible to see until its outline is identified—the new caste system lurks invisibly within the maze of rationalizations we have developed for persistent racial inequality" (12).

These remarks anticipate one of the central claims of her book: that unless people are able to think systemically, taking account of the numerous interconnected laws, institutions,

incentive schemes, and practices that collectively constitute mass incarceration as a

racialized system of social control, then they will remain ignorant of the present realities

of racial oppression in the United States. Alexander continues:

> It is possible—quite easy, in fact—never to see the embedded reality. Only
> after years of working on criminal justice reform did my own focus finally
> shift, and then the rigid caste system slowly came into view. Eventually it
> became obvious. Now it seems odd that I could not see it before (12).

Interestingly, Alexander describes her own protracted process of undergoing a shift in

perspective and focus as facilitated by her work as an advocate and activist for criminal

justice reform. Her book aims to facilitate a similar shift among her readers by conveying

her analysis of mass incarceration to those who have not been similarly engaged. Thus,

although the process of coming to know about the evolution of racialized systems of

social control in the United States may have been different for her than for her readers,

presumably the end result will be roughly the same.

The third thing to note on these themes is the modes of knowing and kinds of knowledge

Alexander explicitly attributes to various groups. The first group she discusses is the

biggest, for it is comprised of "people of all colors, from all walks of life, and in every

major political party" (181). Of and from this group, she writes:

> We may wonder aloud "where have the black men gone?" but *deep down we
> already know*. It is simply taken for granted that, in cities like Baltimore and
> Chicago, the vast majority of young black men are currently under the control
> of the criminal justice system or branded criminals for life (181, my
> emphasis).

According to Alexander, the mass incarceration of people of color, and especially of

young black men, is "treated here in America as a basic fact of life, as normal as separate

water fountains were just a half century ago"—indeed, mass incarceration has been

normalized (181). Although public acknowledgement of the relevant facts "is surprisingly

rare," Alexander alleges that, deep down, virtually everyone in the United States knows

that "large numbers of black men have been locked in cages," and all of us are aware *of*

the role of the criminal justice system in "disappearing" black men (179; 182). However,

on her view this common knowledge is complexly bound up with numerous layers of

ignorance and with a failure to care deeply enough about those who have been, are, and

are most likely to end up incarcerated in the future:

> In fact, it is precisely because we know that black and brown men are far
> more likely to be imprisoned that we, as a nation, have not cared too much
> about it. We tell ourselves they "deserve" their fate, even though we know—
> and don't know—that whites are just as likely to commit many crimes,
> especially drug crimes. We know that people released from prison face a
> lifetime of discrimination, scorn, and exclusion, and yet we claim not to know
> that an undercaste exists. We know and we don't know at the same time
> (182).

Alexander describes this condition of knowing (some things, in some ways) and not

knowing as a state of collective "denial": that is, a failure to "know the truth about mass

incarceration" (183). She suggests that denial of this sort is "facilitated by persistent

racial segregation in housing and schools, by political demagoguery, by racialized media

imagery, and by the ease of changing one's perception of reality simply by changing

television channels" (182). But most importantly, denial of this sort is facilitated by, "a

profound misunderstanding regarding how racial oppression actually works" (183). This,

of course, is the crucial misunderstanding she aims to correct through her analysis of

mass incarceration, contributing thereby to the undoing of white ignorance.

Alexander presents a second group of knowers as far more educated on the problems of

racism and racial oppression in the United States, and as far more concerned about those

whose lives have been marred by incarceration. This group, of which she is a member, is comprised primarily of lawyers and other professionals who work for or in concert with civil rights organizations. In response to the question of why this especially caring group has allowed a human rights nightmare to "occur on their watch," Alexander claims that, "we have not been entirely ignorant of the realities of the new caste system" (223). However, she explains that, "Lawyers have a tendency to identify and concentrate on problems they know how to solve—i.e., problems that can be solved through litigation." And yet, "The mass incarceration of people of color is not that kind of problem" (226). Although Alexander attributes a wealth of knowledge concerning the pernicious workings of the criminal justice and penal systems to civil rights lawyers and advocates, she also claims that what this group knows *how* to do, and the *strategies* they tend to adopt as remedies, betrays tremendously consequential ignorance. She allows that, "We can continue along this road" of piecemeal legal reforms, for "it is a road well travelled." However, "if we do so, we should labor under no illusions that we will end mass incarceration or shake the foundations of the current racial order," and "we must admit the strategy has not made much of a difference" (229). Instead of prioritizing legal battles aimed at protecting and expanding affirmative action programs, and instead of highlighting black people who defy racial stereotypes in litigation and media advocacy while ignoring those labeled "criminals" and "felons" in the hope that racial justice will eventually "trickle down," Alexander suggests that civil rights lawyers and advocates must instead "face the realities of the new caste system and embrace those who are most oppressed" (229). Emphasizing the need to pursue reforms in a way that contributes to

building a "multiracial, bottom-up resistance movement," she summarizes her

recommendations as follows:

> Taking our cue from the courageous civil rights advocates who brazenly
> refused to defend themselves, marching unarmed past white mobs that
> threatened to kill them, we, too, must be the change we hope to create. If we
> want to do more than just end mass incarceration—if we want to put an end to
> the history of racial caste in America—we must lay down our racial bribes,
> join hands with people of all colors who are not content to wait for change to
> trickle down, and say to those who would stand in our way: Accept all of us
> or none (258).

The fourth and final thing worth noting here is really more of a question: specifically,

whether and to what extent Alexander's analysis of mass incarceration points, by way of

omission, to further structural dimensions of racial oppression that have been rendered

invisible by the contents of her book. As Greg Thomas points out, Alexander neglects to

situate her analysis of mass incarceration in relation to the numerous others that have

been articulated by notable scholar-activists, such as Angela Davis. Nor does she so much

as mention, let alone draw upon, the analyses of other past and present prisoners, such as

George Jackson, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Mumia Abu-Jamal, who also

associated themselves with such organizations as the Black Panther Party and self-

identified—or in the case of Abu-Jamal, still do—as political prisoners (Thomas 2012).

Given who Alexander claims to be writing her book for, and her invocation to "embrace

those who are most oppressed," it is striking how voiceless actual prisoners and others

subject to criminalization are in the pages of *The New Jim Crow*. Moreover, although the

American penal system is commonly spoken of in the broader context of the prison-

industrial complex, or what James Boggs calls a "military-economic-police bloc" (Boggs

2009), Alexander scarcely draws out any of the relationships between the mass

incarceration of people of color, the tremendous, ongoing growth in the construction of

prisons, and broader economic trends and structural processes both domestically and globally (e.g., urban deindustrialization, trade liberalization across the borders of nation-states, the financialization of the global economy, and wide-ranging cuts in social services within the borders of various states). In one of her latest books, *The Meaning of Freedom*, Angela Davis explains that, "When we speak of the prison-industrial complex, rather than the prison system more simply, we refer to the set of economic and political relations in which the system of punishment has become embedded" (Davis 2012, 65). While Alexander's work as a civil rights lawyer makes her especially well qualified to speak to the legal dimensions of mass incarceration, it is difficult to understand how the many pernicious elements of a "new racial caste system" could be adequately diagnosed, let alone remedied, without situating processes of enacting laws and constructing key institutions and incentive schemes within the broader context of structural political and economic processes.

By way of contrast, Davis argues that, "Prisons have become an integral part of the U.S. economy, which, in turn, creates profit-based pressure for the ongoing expansion of the prison business." On her account, the process is one of "expanding prisons, incarcerating more people, and drawing more corporations into the punishment industry, thus creating the momentum for further expansion and larger incarcerated populations" (49). Davis' references to "profit-based pressure" place the American criminal justice and penal systems squarely within the larger system of a global capitalist economy—more specifically, that of a late-modern, neoliberal variety of capitalism. Thus, her analysis of the prison-industrial complex also points to a host of agents and agencies who have financial and political stakes in the perpetuation and maintenance of mass incarceration,

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but who are left completely unmentioned in Alexander's book—including the Corrections Corporation of America, manufacturers of such products as soap and bed linens, telecommunications firms, the numerous corporations currently exploiting prison labour (also known as "prison slavery"), and the investors and politicians with formal and informal links to each of the above. As Thomas quite rightly points out, "There is no critical language of "capitalism" or "class" or "exploitation,"" in *The New Jim Crow*, even though, "A few hesitant references to "financial incentive" or "the profit motive in drug law enforcement" may be found, infrequently, in their place" (Thomas 2012). Thus, we are left to wonder what Alexander does and does not know about mass incarceration, as well as what she does and not want to be teaching to the specific communities of knowers she has chosen to address in and through her written work.

This fourth aspect of how the themes of ignorance and knowledge play out in *The New Jim Crow* is complexly bound up with the first three. As I pointed out earlier, Alexander is a civil rights lawyer whose work qualifies her as an epistemic authority on the legal dimensions of mass incarceration. While she describes how her own ignorance with respect to the existence and character of the new racialized system of social control has gradually been undone over the course of years of work in the criminal justice system, it would seem that either the structural economic and political dimensions of this system have not been included in the curriculum (i.e., she remains, for the most part, ignorant on these matters), or else they have been included, but her project is not to inform and educate her chosen audiences on these matters (i.e., she is not ignorant, or not entirely, and yet she has elected not to share her knowledge for reasons as of yet unknown). Either way, Alexander does not so much as hint at, let alone admit to, the limited scope of her

analysis. Nor does her writing point to any of the more expansive analyses available in scholarly, popular, and "grey" literatures, circulating in existing social movement spaces, and articulated and shared from inside the walls of American prisons. This suggests, first, that there may well be knowers who are more and/or differently knowledgeable on crucial dimensions of the systems Alexander is writing about—some of whom she has elected to write her book "for," rather than *from* or *with*, and whose voices, experiences, histories, and ways of knowing have at any rate been excluded because of her specific aims and preferred mode of analysis. Secondly, it suggests that there are other communities of knowers who seem to Alexander to be ignorant of what she has come to know, particularly white knowers, whose ignorance, it seems, would not as likely be undone were she to have written her book from or with those trapped within America's latest caste system. Apparently, then, the analysis Alexander offers, as well as her representations of herself and others as knowers with varying levels and kinds of knowledge, have been shaped in advance by what she expects her audiences to know, to not know, and to not want to know about mass incarceration.

3.4. Mass Incarceration and Complacency

Given Alexander's claims that (a) virtually everyone in the United States knows *that* millions of black and brown men have been locked away in cages, and are aware *of* the role of the criminal justice system in disappearing people of color (these are treated as "basic facts of life"); and that (b) many civil rights lawyers and advocates, among others, have a sophisticated understanding of the interlocking *systemic* factors responsible for mass incarceration and the creation of racialized undercaste, what are we to make of the

fact that the vast majority of Americans continue to allow for this system to be perpetuated, or else persist in pursuing ineffectual remedies? Of course, there are significant differences between those who fall into categories (a) and (b): only those in the latter category understand mass incarceration as a racialized system of social control, while those in the former category are aware of mass incarceration as a problem, but do not understand the systemic dimensions of the problem, and hence continue to treat racism and racial oppression as primarily a function of the attitudes of individuals. Having acknowledged these differences in knowledge and understanding, many people still seem to be in the grips of what we might call "motivational inertia"—knowing that the mass incarceration of people of color is unjust, yet seemingly incapable of mustering the motivation to do much, if anything, to bring about the dismantling of this particular form of racial oppression. Perhaps certain segments of the American public are for the most part *indifferent* to the lives of others, and *apathetic* with respect to the life prospects of black and brown men, especially those living in impoverished urban neighbourhoods. Indeed, Alexander suggests that many white Americans have not cared very much at all about the millions of black and brown men who are currently imprisoned, nor have they expressed much concern over the millions more who have been, and continue to be, relegated to the margins of society—not concerned enough, at any rate, to inquire into and seek to truly understand the circumstances of mass incarceration, let alone engage in ameliorative action of some shape or form. "It is this failure to care, really care across color lines," claims Alexander, "that lies at the core of this system of control and every racial caste system that has existed in the United States or anywhere else in the world" (Alexander 2012, 234).

Of course, there is also a further possibility left unexplored by Alexander: that certain people with privilege and power have a vested interest in the perpetuation of the mass incarceration of people of color, either because they care more about their own perceived safety and security, or holding on to what they take to be their wealth and property, or maintaining various other unearned and unconferred privileges (economic, psychological, and so forth), or because they are members of those organizations or groups (e.g., telecommunications firms, corporate manufacturers, police and corrections unions, politicians, and so on) which are in various ways involved in building and running prisons for profit, to consolidate power over others, and/or to secure a wage, benefits, and make a decent living. To the extent that members of these groups fail to care, or care enough, about the lives of those people of color who are targeted for incarceration and disenfranchisement, and about dismantling racism and racial oppression, they too may exhibit a form of indifference worthy of the name of an "ordinary vice of domination" (Tessman 2005, Ch. 4). However, knowing, direct participation in the perpetuation of this oppressive system suggests that "indifferent" may not be adequately descriptive— "cruel," "ruthless," and other terms of aretaic appraisal seem to be needed to flesh out certain of these characterizations—recognizing, of course, that some are faced with so few options for employment that working in corrections or law enforcement may be pursued begrudgingly, with regrets, or at least not wholeheartedly.

Yet it may well be—and Alexander does encourage us to explore this possibility—that motivational inertia comes in multiple, interrelated forms, including denial, resignation, and despair, as well as indifference, apathy, and complacency, and we have only begun to scratch the surface in naming some of these, not yet understanding the phenomena that

we, like Alexander, have been picking out. Notice, finally, that what we have been doing here is picking out certain structures or traits of character, which have traditionally been described by moral philosophers as "vices." We might think of these as a particular species of vices: "motivational vices."

With these speculative remarks in mind, in the next three sections of this chapter I will shift the focus of the discussion away from the theme of white ignorance, focusing instead on the theme of character and various structures or traits of character. But in Section 3.2.1, I would first like to consider a skeptical rejoinder to my claim that a critical examination of the motivational capacities of various agents is integral to fleshing out an account of complacency in the context of mass incarceration. Some might argue that complacency with respect to the complex problem of mass incarceration *just is* white ignorance, and that an epistemology of ignorance gives us everything we need to understand and remedy complacency in this context. In that case, complacency would be a product of the substantive cognitive practices which socially dominant groups engage in within a racially oppressive society—a "fantasyland of moral approbation" (Alcoff 2007, 49) which allows socially and self-identified whites to feel satisfied with themselves and with the world around them. Although I do think that white ignorance plays a significant role in sustaining complacency, I want to suggest, first, that people cannot be complacent with respect to problems they do not know exist (which is not to say that they cannot be complacent due to inadequate understanding of a problem); and second, that to address deeply entrenched ignorance and shallow understanding is not yet to address complacency. So, in order to resist this reductive move, it will be important for me to consider the potential limitations of focusing solely or exclusively on white ignorance

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when seeking to understand and remedy pervasive motivational inertia, and what examining complacency through the lens of virtue theory can help us to see that is not easily seen when attending primarily to matters cognitive. In Section 3.4.2 I will then go on to offer an overview of the subject matter, aims, and methodology of the variety of virtue theory that I believe is needed to develop an account of complacency that is adequate to especially complex social problems: namely, critical character theory. Finally, in Section 3.4.3 I will consider how critical character theory might prove useful for sorting out what it means to be complacent with respect to mass incarceration.

3.4.1. Is Complacency Just White Ignorance?

Is complacency with respect to racism and racial oppression the same thing as white ignorance? And is undoing white ignorance equivalent to "overcoming" complacency of this kind? Several reasons might tempt us to answer these questions in the affirmative. Recall that Mills describes white ignorance as "a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of all social realities" (Mills 1997, 18-19). His compelling thought is that because the Racial Contract prescribes an "inverted epistemology"—"a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)"—communities of white knowers end up living out their lives in "racial fantasyland, a 'consensual hallucination'" (18). That is, those who are in the grips of white ignorance adhere to systematically distorted representations of themselves, of their communities, and of broader social realities, effectively "duping themselves about the true nature of their social world" (Alcoff 2007, 50). Importantly, Mills claims that these representations distort matters *moral* as well as

factual in nature. On the one hand, communities of white knowers will tend to represent themselves in ways that at least absolve and excuse harms done and wrongs committed, depicting themselves as innocent or benign, if not morally upright, respectable, and even just. Meanwhile, differently racialized others will tend to be depicted as inferior, deserving of whatever ill treatment befalls them ("criminals get what they deserve"; "those people need to cultivate better family values"), and so forth. On the other hand, communities of white knowers will tend to represent the basic structure of society as fundamentally just, or at least the best of all possible economic, social, and political worlds, giving themselves little reason to question the status quo. As Alcoff nicely sums things up:

> If it is true that most people prefer to think of themselves as moral or at least excusable in their actions, then in unjust societies those in dominant and privileged positions must be able to construct representations of themselves and others to support a fantasyland of moral approbation (Alcoff 2007, 50).

Now, complacency is commonly thought of in terms of feelings of "satisfaction," especially "self-satisfaction," although these feelings may be directed towards the world as well as towards oneself (see Chapter 1). As Alcoff suggests, one way that members of socially dominant groups might come to have and express feelings of these sorts is by insisting on thinking of themselves as morally good or at least excusable in their actions and omissions, and then constructing distorted representations of themselves and society on that basis. That is essentially how I described Archie Bunker in Section 3.2: I suggested there that the "self-made man" narrative he insists on telling about himself tacitly affirms the biological superiority of whites while denying the oppressive conditions under which many people of color live in the United States, and that because he insists on maintaining an inflated self-image his false beliefs are for all intents and

purposes rendered invulnerable to disconfirmation. I take it that Bunker is a paradigmatic

example of a knower in the grips of white ignorance. Seeing as how he *feels* satisfied

with his own condition and performance as a moral agent and with the condition of his

country in spite of recalcitrant counterevidence, common usage of the term tempts us to

conclude that Bunker is "complacent" with respect to racism and racial oppression—and

further, to think that complacency of this kind *just is* white ignorance.

If that is indeed the case, then it is also tempting to think that complacency might be

"shattered" when the shroud of white darkness is pierced by, say, the truth of mass

incarceration; or that white people might even manage to "overcome" their own

complacency with respect to mass incarceration. Suppose Bunker purchases a copy of

The New Jim Crow. Although he quickly realizes this book was not written for folks quite

like him (his sympathies do not initially lie with the cause of ending racial oppression),

he finds Alexander's analysis compelling nonetheless, especially after reading about her

former ignorance and how it was gradually undone. Captivated, he reads passages of the

book aloud to himself:

> For me, the new caste system is now as obvious as my own face in the mirror.
> Like an optical illusion—one in which the embedded image is impossible to
> see until its outline is identified—the new caste system lurks invisibly within
> the maze of rationalizations we have developed for persistent racial inequality
> (Alexander 2012, 12).

Bunker begins working through his own internecine web of rationalizations, stumbling

hard over each of the myths and lies upon which his self-image has been built

(biologically different? superior? self-made?), and struggling to come to grips with the

painful realities of a racially oppressive society. His buoyant, optimistic affect begins to

collapse under the weight of so many well-established and carefully documented facts.

"How could I have voted for Nixon, Reagan, and so on? How could my neighbors, teachers, and colleagues still be so blind to all of this, not to mention my own goddamned family?" Bewilderment and incredulity begin to spiral into feelings of rage, self-loathing, resentment, and misanthropy, before morphing again into sadness, heartbreak, and grief. Comforted by the thought that it took years of working on criminal justice reform before Alexander's perspective and focus finally underwent such a dramatic shift, Bunker is still amazed that he could have allowed himself to remain blinded to the realities of mass incarceration for so long.

To cut to the chase, presumably "overtly racist Bunker" is perfectly capable of transforming himself into "enlightened, race-conscious Bunker" with a little help from a book such as Alexander's. Through a piecemeal process of cognitive reform, he could manage to correct many of his false beliefs, acquire a number of true beliefs, and gradually develop a more adequate understanding of himself and of broader social realities, including the reality of mass incarceration as a racialized system of social control. Although the process would by no means be easy or painless (after all, cherished images of himself and his country, among other things, are as stake), Bunker could manage to construct far more accurate representations of self and society, undergoing a dramatic shift in perspective and focus in the process. Given that, with his newly acquired knowledge and altered patterns of perceptual attentiveness, he would no longer be able to feel satisfied with his own condition and performance as a moral agent and with the condition of his country in relation to mass incarceration, it is tempting to conclude that this is what it means for complacency of this kind to be "shattered"—and *a fortiori*, that "undoing" white ignorance *just is* what it means to "overcome" complacency. If an

epistemology of ignorance gives us everything we need to understand and remedy complacency, then why bother turning to critical character theory for additional guidance? What, if anything, can critical character theory help us to see that cannot already be seen when we are focusing on white ignorance?

These rejoinders have an unquestionable pull. Nevertheless, I think it would be a mistake to understand complacency as merely a matter of excessively positively valenced feelings or moods, and to understand processes of "overcoming" complacency as merely a matter of purposefully coming to acquire new knowledge and experiencing appropriately negative affects both in the process and as a result. We might call this a picture of complacency as distinguished by the experience of *overly positive self- and world-directed feelings*. On this picture, those in the grip of complacency manifestly do not feel the right way towards the right people, at the right times, and so on, to borrow a handy phrase from Aristotle. A picture of this sort also encourages us to imagine a countervailing, hard-won virtue as the end product of a prolonged "bending of the stick" in the direction of negative affect, where this metaphorical bending requires us to break a number of dysfunctional epistemic rules and meta-rules by means of dedicated, enlightenment-oriented self-discipline. But before I offer my reasons for finding this picture of complacency inadequate and moving beyond it, consider some potential limitations of focusing solely or exclusively on white ignorance when attempting to account for the persistence of racism, racial oppression, and white privilege in such contexts as the contemporary United States.

From a pedagogical perspective, I take it that one of the most important lessons to be

learned from Alexander's book-length treatise on mass incarceration is that white

ignorance may need to be *maintained* in certain respects (concerning, for example, the

political economy of mass incarceration) if other of its dimensions are to be undone

(concerning, for example, the legal dimensions of mass incarceration as a form of

structural, group-based oppression) for the sake of broadening the base of and advancing

an anti-oppressive movement in its early stages.[14] Of course, the undoing of politically

consequential ignorance in any of its multiple, deeply imbricated dimensions is cause for

celebration. In some cases it may even be a prerequisite for further movement in the

direction of cognitive reform at the level of explicit, propositional knowledge. However,

in working *with* the grain of white ignorance, as Alexander does and, arguably, must,

there is a risk that certain segments of the wider public will cling to and endorse partial

diagnoses of the problem at issue, and thus end up pursuing or agreeing to superficial

remedies, the attainment of which may make further movement in the direction of

structural change far more difficult than it could otherwise have been. How, after all,

could Alexander's analysis of mass incarceration, and her representations of herself and

others as knowers, not have been shaped in advance by what she expected her diverse

audiences to know, to not know, and to not want to know? If you are engaged in a form

of pedagogical practice one of the primary aims of which is to enable the undoing of

white ignorance, should you expect to find students who welcome or are responsive to

your efforts to work *against* the grain? And if meeting people where they are means

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[14] My thanks to Chike Jeffers for highlighting and helping me to understand the broader significance of this point.

knowingly maintaining political consequential ignorance, should you expect to collaboratively achieve anything more than gradual, piecemeal reforms?

It is worth reemphasizing that it would be foolhardy not to celebrate the undoing of any kind of politically consequential ignorance, especially when the lives and livelihoods of millions of people are at stake. Remember that the concerns I am raising here are with the potential limitations of taking white ignorance as a *sole* or *exclusive focus* in discussions of the persistence of racism, racial oppression, and white privilege—that is, these are not concerns with taking white ignorance as *a significant focus*. In addition to running the risk of maintaining white ignorance in certain consequential respects, any approach to addressing the ubiquity of motivational inertia which upholds the notion that the vast majority of whites are not motivated to bring an end to the mass incarceration of people of color because they are ignorant of it lends undue credence to the idea that if whites *did* know about the systemic nature of racial oppression, then they *would*, by and large, be motivated to take responsibility for working on dismantling the system at issue. However, I worry that white knowers can come to understand mass incarceration in systemic terms, judge it to be tremendously unjust, and yet still not find the realities of mass incarceration particularly strange, surprising, or wonder how they came about, for it is commonly assumed that this is how the world is supposed to be, or at least that it could not be otherwise (see Babbitt 2009, 239)—and perhaps most significantly, that individual people are incapable of making a meaningful difference when dealing with a problem of this magnitude and complexity. Even those who are sensitive to and cognizant of possibilities for working toward the enactment of relevant legal reforms (unravelling "three-strikes-and-you're-out" laws by organizing to petition the state, for example) may yet find their

newly acquired knowledge to be more politically disabling than enabling—wracked with

the feelings of guilt, anguish, helplessness and hopelessness that have been aroused by

their newly acquired knowledge, and unsure of whether they ever could be "part of the

solution," rather than remaining part of the problem (see Tessman 2005, 83-106).

To be clear, I agree with Mills and Alexander that processes of undoing white ignorance

are crucial when it comes to understanding and working to remedy motivational inertia

with respect to racial oppression. I want to suggest that one of the ways in which they are

particularly crucial is when it comes to upsetting certain modes of *epistemic comfort*:

namely, the comfort that stems from supposing that anyone, anywhere, can know

anything in the same way as differently situated others; that similarly situated others are

in a position to adequately judge one another's performance and condition as moral

agents, as well as that of the country of their residence; and ultimately, that one is a

morally good person, or at least excusable in one's actions and omissions, and that the

society in which one lives is basically just, or at least the best of all possible worlds. In

other words, the problem of white ignorance can be understood, in part, as manifesting

itself in how *comfortable* or *at ease* many socially and self-identified white people have

become with certain, peculiarly individualistic epistemic meta-rules, rules, and their

products, the observance of which are conditions of full membership in communities of

white knowers (see Section 3.2; Mills 1997). Those in the grips of white ignorance tend

to be "normatively happy," *loving* the dominant norms of the society in which they live

and the various benefits accrued through their embodiment, including the cognitive

norms enacted in predominantly white communities (for more on the notion of

"normative happiness," see Lugones 1989, 283-84). Processes of undoing white

ignorance certainly help to "wipe the normative smiles off the faces" of white knowers, if you will, situating the epistemic practices of socially dominant communities in their local specificity and in relation to present organizations of economic and political power; bringing into focus the peculiar hubris embodied by communities of white knowers; and demanding of entire communities previously remote practices of humility and moral deference (see Thomas 1992/1993; Campbell 1997). The demand to undo white ignorance is undoubtedly a call for thoroughgoing personal and community-wide change.

3.4.2. Complacency as Character Damage

Having said this, and judging in part from my own experience, I am concerned that whites who are no longer epistemically comfortable in the above mentioned senses will still, by and large, be familiar with and understand the dominant norms of the society in which they live, and thus how to move confidently through various spaces (of worship, education, work, public office, and so on) in their day-to-day lives—another, more embodied and skill-based variety of epistemic comfort (see, e.g., Lugones 1989, 283-84; Bailey 2007; Shotwell 2011). I take it that the present configuration of American society will remain a source of confirmation for how whites take up and move through spaces in relation to darker bodies, as well as for what their own bodies know how to do, whereas the work of learning how to move, behave, and relate to others in non-dominative ways takes careful attention and effort, and can be tiresome, while also presenting numerous opportunities for feeling less "on top of things" and "in control," signifying in sum the prospect of being far less at ease—or even ill at ease—than one had formerly been in the world. Moreover, having perhaps unwittingly or unself-consciously grown accustomed to

the militaristic, occupation-style policing and surveillance of impoverished urban neighbourhoods on the one hand, and the protective, exclusionary policing of their own neighbourhoods on the other, especially middle and upper class whites' senses of safety and security—a narrowed sense of security as *external and internal policing*, as opposed to a broader sense of being safe and secure in virtue of the quality of one's relationships with others and in relation to supportive social, economic, political institutions (see Davis 2012 40-41; 111; 121-122)—have come to depend, to a considerable extent, on the normalization of mass incarceration. Hence, even for those whites who care deeply about bringing an end to racism and racial oppression in the United States and who have come to judge that mass incarceration is a manifestation of profound structural injustice, not only are they likely to have grown *comfortable with the socio-political status quo*—in the sense that ingrown, morbid fears of "criminals" are presumed to be kept at bay by oppressive police tactics—but the anticipated effects of altering prevailing drug enforcement laws and shifting police practices tend to arouse anxieties of the sort that are not always, or even typically, responsive to reasons and better judgment. As Martin Luther King Jr. made a point of emphasizing several decades ago, "The comfortable, the entrenched, the privileged cannot continue to tremble at the prospect of change in the status quo" (see the epigraph to this chapter; more in King in Chapter 5).[15]

Finally, the motivational capacities of many white Americans have evidently been configured to accord with dominant *moral* norms and values, which is to say that even those whites who reject certain of these norms and values for principled reasons are still

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[15] Here it is worth nothing that other dimensions of social location and identity, such as gender, class, disability, and age, will also influence one's level of comfort and discomfort in the world, and more specifically, living in a militaristic, police state. Thanks to Susan Sherwin for encouraging me to grapple further with these complexities.

defined positively by them; that whites tend to be motivated primarily by opportunities already well understood and expected, especially opportunities for individual achievement in various domains (e.g., schooling, parenting, careering, staying healthy, and investing; "staying out of trouble," keeping a clean criminal record, and finding good lawyers to win legal battles when need be); and, thus, whites tend to focus on addressing problems they perceive to be within their own control as individuals, while distancing themselves from problems they regard as out of their control, or at least as not possible sources of socially recognized and rewarded personal accomplishment (see Eliasoph 1998; more on this in Chapter 4). Simply put, even those self-described "antiracist" whites who are *intellectually* at odds with the normalization of mass incarceration in the United States tend to be *morally comfortable* with dominant, highly individualistic norms and values, because, for among other reasons, these norms and values provide a reliable source of personally enabling recognition, self-esteem, and apparently promising routes to economic and social security in an otherwise turbulent world.

I take it that it would be difficult to argue for the claim that being normatively comfortable is a function or result of life choices for which individual white people are solely and wholly responsible for acquiring, or that individual whites could simply choose to wake up one day and no longer be at ease in each of the above mentioned ways. Nevertheless, I think we should understand this multidimensional form of normative comfort as a form of *character damage* inflicted on whites—including purportedly antiracist whites—under the circumstances of the mass incarceration of people of color. Indeed, I propose that complacency with respect to mass incarceration should be understood in precisely these terms, as the complex embodiment of epistemic, socio-

political, and moral senses of comfort which stem from living within, and in a number of ways benefitting from, presently instituted arrangements and hierarchies of power, and which prevent people from inquiring into, understanding, and responding well to complex social and ecological problems.

I am not suggesting that complacency of this kind can only be manifested among whites—considerations of class, ability, and age are undoubtedly relevant here, for example. Nor am I suggesting that is impossible for whites to make progress in working against the inhabitation of normative comfort over time and with serious effort, or that it would be unreasonable to expect that such efforts be undertaken, for it is certainly not my purpose to absolve or excuse. That certain forms of character damage may have relational and structural sources as well as personal ones is by no means to deny that such damage can be, to a significant extent, self-inflicted. However, since the focus of the present chapter is on communities of white knowers, and on individual whites understood as community members inhabiting various institutions, I shall continue to focus on the specific challenges of whites considered as such. White Americans, as well as other socially and self-identified whites living within the borders of the United States, are complacent with respect to the mass incarceration of people of color insofar as we show ourselves to be normatively comfortable living within institutions and networks of relationships that we acknowledge to be profoundly, structurally unjust—*comfortable enough*, that is, not to take responsibility for learning to work collaboratively with differently racialized others toward the goals of envisioning and instituting alternative arrangements. Although those of us who are individually and communally working through what are likely to be lifelong processes of undoing white ignorance may not be

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"normatively happy" with the present configuration of society, it seems that many of us are *comfortable enough* inhabiting dominant norms and values not to be motivated to seriously consider, to participate in collectively envisioning, and to actively pursue more thoroughgoing forms of structural and personal transformation in concert with members of frontline communities of color. No doubt this is in part because many predominantly white, middle and upper class communities are not targeted by and directly confronted with the disastrous results of mass incarceration, and so, to say the least, members of these communities tend not to be ill at ease living within American society as it is. Judging that mass incarceration is tremendously unjust, many whites do not find their own present circumstances to be *intolerable* or *unliveable*, perhaps not appreciating the extent to which officially "colorblind" criminal justice and penal systems will end up targeting everyone who, for whatever reason or twist of fortune, winds up living in neighbourhoods occupied by increasingly militarized law enforcement agencies.

Because many communities of white knowers are unlikely to feel viscerally the imperative to engage the real possibility of alternative social, economic, and political arrangements (improved housing, healthcare, schooling, and possibilities for socially meaningful work in communities of color, for example), it is reasonable to suppose that other than purely intellectual means of character repair are required to "shake us out of" our complacency. Returning to my engagement with recent work on the epistemology of ignorance, I propose that being shaken out of complacency with respect to mass incarceration cannot simply be a matter of undergoing a shift in perspective and focus as a result of the undoing of white ignorance, skeptical rejoinders notwithstanding. Rather, I want to suggest that it is a matter of a more complex and ongoing process of personal

transformation that can only take place in and through the work of shifting relationships with members of frontline communities of color, while supporting and participating in struggles to create more just and humane arrangements.

3.4.3. Critical Character Theory

Now, some readers might grant that the multidimensional form of normative comfort described in the previous section is not only pervasive, but appropriately described as a flaw or defect of persons. However, these readers may still struggle to understand why comfort of this sort should be regarded as a "vice," let alone a "motivational vice." After all, have I not already suggested that individuals are not solely and wholly responsible for becoming comfortable in these ways? Moreover, have I not also denied that individuals could simply choose to wake up one day and no longer be at ease in each of the above mentioned ways? Even if "normative comfort," so described, is a form of "character damage," why consider it a *vice of individuals*—as opposed to, say, an unfortunate but inevitable fact of life? By way of response, I now want to suggest that the concept of "vice" may well need to be reconsidered in certain respects to account for a condition that does seem to be afflicting a number of different agents, for I agree that more traditional ways of conceptualizing "character," "virtue," and "vice" are unlikely to be up to the task. In this section I will contend that a particular variety of virtue theory is needed to develop an account of complacency that is adequate to the complex problem of mass incarceration: namely, critical character theory. Allow me to offer a brief overview of the subject matter, aims, and methodology of this emerging variant on virtue theory

What is "critical character theory"? As Robin S. Dillon explains, critical character theory is a field of inquiry that seeks to "understand moral character as affected by domination and subordination and by the struggles both to maintain and to resist and overthrow them" (Dillon 2012, 84). While its subject matter is the moral character of individuals, it does not take a methodologically individualist approach to theorizing character or particular structures or traits of character. Rather, critical character theory is concerned with individuals as members of communities or groups of people living within various social, economic, and political institutions, which contribute to organizing relationships and lives along hierarchies of power, some of which are morally illegitimate. Proponents of critical character theory hold, on the one hand, that systems of domination and oppression inflict moral damage on the characters of the people who live within them, preventing those people from living morally good lives; and on the other hand, that certain structures or traits of character dispose or enable people to acquiesce in, resist, or struggle against, or else live out their lives in ways that contribute to the maintenance and perpetuation of systems of domination and oppression. Of course, this is not to suggest that there are no other ways in which people are damaged by systemic domination and oppression, or that *moral* damage is the most important or severe variety. It is also crucial to highlight and bemoan the damage wrought in and through psychological oppression and related pathologies (Bartky 1990; Fanon 2008), the contraction of life prospects and the shortening of lives (Gilmore 2007), as well as everyday material hardship and struggles to meet basic needs of survival—not to mention the elaborate psychological contortions the affluent and privileged must endure to simply live with themselves in an enormously unjust society. In addition to encouraging recognition of these very serious

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harms, theorizing character critically entails coming to see character as "both a site and source of oppression, as a center of resistance both to oppression and to change, and as both subject and object of liberatory struggle" (106).

Critical character theory has an explicitly liberatory orientation and aim: it "seeks liberation of and through character," (86) pressing the activity of theorizing character into the service of the practical end of dismantling morally illegitimate hierarchies of power.[16] Having said this, critical character theory does not purport to offer normative guidance sufficient for liberatory purposes. As Lisa Tessman rightly points out, "Other sorts of normative theories are crucial for identifying structural causes of injustice and for recommending strategies for bringing about structural change" (Tessman 2005, 11). For example, Alexander's structural analysis of mass incarceration can be understood as a contribution to theories of both types, for it offers a diagnosis of one prominent form of racial oppression, as well as some tentative recommendations for situating legal reform efforts within the context of a broader movement-building strategy (for more on "naturalized" nonideal theory, see Chapter 2, Section 2.4). Critical character theory has an especially important role to play in relation to action-guiding normative theories, for "in prescribing actions, such theories may overlook the limitations of the selves who are to act: the victims of and the resistors to oppression," not to mention those who animate

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[16] As Dillon points out, critical character theory could be taken up from a number of non-feminist perspectives, (e.g., various strands of black liberatory politics, liberation theology, anarchism, and so forth), although she is particularly interested in theorizing character critically from a feminist point of view. She explains that, "feminist critical character theorizing puts the wrongness of the oppression of women front and center and examines, on the one hand, actual practices of character development and, on the other, appraisals of character and theoretical treatments of virtue and vice, in the light of women's oppression. Further, it seeks to develop accounts of character and character traits that take women's experiences seriously but not uncritically, that carry in them right valuing of women, and that provide insight, guidance, and cautions for liberatory struggle that seeks to make the world one in which women and men are treated equally as human and equally worthy of concern and respect" (Dillon 2012, 87).

socially dominant roles or passively accept the ongoing domination of others (11; see also Dillon 2012, 90). Thus, critical character theory ought to be understood as a necessary part of a much broader field of liberatory thought and practice. Work conducted in this broader field seeks to identify and understand not only (a) the social and material conditions for oppressive structures, and (b) how these structures can be dismantled, but also (c) the systemic sources of various forms of character damage, (d) how particular forms of damage limit the ability and willingness of individuals to support efforts aimed at dismantling oppressive structures, and (e) the costs exacted to character in engaging in or resisting liberatory struggles.

Largely inspired by Tessman's earlier work on the "burdened virtues" and "feminist eudaimonism" (see Tessman 2005, 2009), critical character theory endorses several revisions of Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian virtue theory, each of which stem from taking multiple, interlocking forms of structural, group-based oppression as the assumed background against which inquiries into character proceed. Critical character theory focuses on the limitations to and burdens on "moral goodness" for all people living within systems of domination and oppression, "where the external background conditions necessary for flourishing will tend to be lacking or diminished," (Tessman 2009, 159; 2005) and where oppression damages everyone, "though in different ways and to different degrees" (Dillon 2012, 95). Its proponents contend, and I agree, that at least some of the ills of domination and oppression, and the mechanisms through which these systems are perpetuated, can be understood in terms of and traced to certain structures or traits of character—and conversely, that struggles for liberation need to engage with and work on repairing the vices of individuals.

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Since there is good reason to believe that "character distorted by vice is more common within systems of domination and oppression than is generally acknowledged" (Dillon 2012, 86), Dillon suggests giving priority to the analysis of what has traditionally been called "vice," as well as specific "vices." This means shifting away from the focus of more traditional approaches to theorizing character, virtue, and vice (i.e., virtue theory), as well as from efforts to develop an ethics that takes character as its central organizing concept (i.e., virtue ethics). After all, these approaches tend to give priority to articulating a particular conception of human flourishing, and to theorizing virtue and specific virtues as contributing to or constitutive of flourishing so conceived. These approaches also tend to conceive of vice as simply the contradictory or contrary of virtue, while treating specific vices as barriers to the possibility of living a properly flourishing human life. Yet as Dillon argues, "to the extent that vice is both one of the forms of damage that domination and oppression inflict on individuals and one of the mechanisms through which they are sustained, attention to vice as well as virtue is of central importance to theorizing character critically" (86). In light of the numerous cognitive and practical tasks for which the concept of "vice" may be useful for differently situated people and groups, and given that we sometimes cannot "get a good understanding of what the virtuous opposite of some vice is until we have examined that vice thoroughly," (93) giving priority to the analysis of vice would seem to be a long overdue shift in focus.

Notice, as well, that traditional approaches to virtue theory tend to conceive of character as something "inside" the individual, a function or result of life choices for which the individual is solely and wholly responsible both for acquiring and for correcting. While this is untrue as a description of the most famous virtue theory (viz., Aristotle's), it is a

view commonly expressed by many inheritors of this tradition of thought, especially among white, male, Anglo-American philosophers. These approaches also tend to neglect or ignore the sociopolitical dimensions of how character is shaped, developed, and appraised in specific circumstances, not to mention how certain structures or traits of character come to play various roles in supporting and resisting domination and subordination (83).

In light of the insight of feminists, among others, who argue that, "character is not simply a matter of what is inside the individual… but is also a matter of interpersonal, social, cultural, and political contexts," (91) proponents of critical character theory set out to problematize traditional conceptualizations of "character," "vice," and "virtue," while also reconceptualizing these central concepts from a liberatory perspective. For example, instead of thinking of character and specific character traits as simple, isolated, static structures that exist inside the individual, Dillon suggests "holding together in creative tension a perspective that views the individual through the social and a perspective that views the social through the individual," while also thinking of character as "fluid, dynamic, and contextualized, both bodily and socially, as better understood as processive rather than substantive, as capable of stability without being static" (104; 105). And rather than taking any particular, purportedly universal conception of human flourishing as criterial for the definition of certain traits of character as virtues or vices, Dillon recommends decentering the concept of flourishing when theorizing character critically, opting instead for the inclusion of criteria that "link the badness of vice to the tendency to reinforce oppression and the goodness of virtue to the tendency to subvert it" (98).

Of course, this is not to say that there are or could be no structures or traits of character that are virtuous while also tending to reinforce oppression, nor that there are no traits that are vicious while also tending to undermine oppression (on the "burdened virtues," see Tessman 2005). While certain vices are fairly obviously connected to participation in economic, social, and political processes that reproduce structural oppression (e.g., indifference to many serious harms and modalities of suffering), there are others that do seem to be exclusively concerned with degrading interpersonal interactions, or with hampering personal growth and development—and *mutatis mutandis* for virtues. Whether there are such "purely interpersonal" or "personal" vices and virtues is, I think, in large part an empirical matter. Structures of character that may seem in the abstract to be unrelated to broader social practices and institutional processes often turn out to be less separable than at first expected—though focusing on some clear paradigms can sometimes be a decent starting point for investigation.

How can critical character theory help to further advance discussion of the persistence of racism and racial oppression in the United States and elsewhere? Consider the mass incarceration of people of color under the auspices of the so-called War on Drugs. While an analysis of white ignorance is important for understanding how ignorance of mass incarceration is produced and maintained among socially dominant knowers, and how knowers of this sort might go about undoing and distancing themselves from dysfunctional cognitive practices, I worry that it may not be as useful for understanding various forms of motivational inertia—which I have tentatively called "motivational vices"—in all of their complexity. Critical character theory invites us to pose further questions that are crucial to fleshing out an account of complacency and other forms of

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motivational vice in the context of mass incarceration. It is worthwhile to consider

questions of the following sort:

- Are the motivational capacities of differently situated people, communities, and groups damaged in the circumstances of mass incarceration?

- What specific forms of motivational vice tend to be produced under these circumstances?

- How are various forms of motivational vice shaped, developed, and evaluated, particularly among members of socially dominant groups?

- What are the systemic and relational sources of character damage in a society where the criminal justice system works to imprison millions of people of color and create a massive racialized undercaste?

- Have certain motivational vices been normalized in and by members of socially dominant groups, as Tessman and Dillon argue is the case with the "ordinary vices of domination" (Tessman 2005, 54-79; Dillon 2012, 96)?

- What roles do various forms of motivational vice play in maintaining and strengthening the criminal justice and penal systems as a racialized system of social control? What does this tell us about the "badness" of these vices?

- Given that character repair is part of broader efforts aimed at bringing an end to mass incarceration, what is involved in repairing various forms of motivational vice?

As the reader may have noticed, I have taken some of these questions into account when

describing complacency as a multidimensional form of normative comfort in the previous

section of this chapter. I will explore other questions in Chapter 4 while developing

further my account of complacency, saving questions at the end of this list for Chapter 5.

3.5. Conclusion

In summary, it is crucially important for white knowers to acknowledge and feel

appropriately towards the suffering of black and brown men and their families, whether

imprisoned or relegated to the margins of society; towards the racially oppressive nature

of the society in which we are currently living; and towards our own motivational inertia

and complicity in the ongoing perpetuation of structural domination and oppression,

because, for among other reasons this helps us to realize that *perhaps we and our*

communities are not the way they should be. However, as Susan Babbitt argues

elsewhere,

> we would only entertain such doubts [that is, take them as seriously as we
> ought to] if we understood our human possibilities well enough to see that we
> not only could, but really ought to, live differently in relevant respects. That
> is, we only ask questions—worth pursuing—if we think that we really could
> and ought to be otherwise" (Babbitt 2009, 241).

I want to suggest that fostering the ability to understand our human possibilities is not

solely or exclusively a matter of ignorance and knowledge, for it is also, and perhaps

more centrally, a matter of the kind of *commitment* and *vision* that is born of, and

propelled by, acute, unliveable discomfort—and of the conspicuous lack thereof within

and among certain communities of epistemic, moral, and political agents.

In light of considerations such as these, in Chapter 4 I will go on to argue that members

of a variegated and in many ways divided citizenry are called upon to work

collaboratively toward elaborating and building alternatives to a structurally unjust and

ecologically unsustainable status quo. This is especially the case when well-known

remedies no longer seem to inspire suitably broad-based collective struggle, and have

grown ineffective, in part, due to their predictability and recuperation. Recall Alexander's

worries about the inefficacy of the "piecemeal legal reform" strategy adopted by many

civil rights lawyers and advocates: "We can continue along this road," she writes. But "if

we do, we should labor under no illusions that we will end mass incarceration or shake

the foundations of the current racial order," and "we must admit the strategy has not made much of a difference" (Alexander 2012, 229; see Section 3.3.2). As Babbitt convincingly argues, in some cases of structural injustice alternative arrangements can only be discovered if agents actively and collaboratively engage the real possibility of more just and humane circumstances and conditions *without knowing in advance how it will all work out, or even whether it possibly could*.

With this thought in mind, we should take seriously the possibility that the true ethical dimensions of an agent's character and actions may not lie only or primarily in the representations of self and society from which they issue forth, or in the possibilities they are capable of grasping from where they currently stand, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the *risks*—moral, political, and economic—they actually take in pursuit of more just and humane circumstances and conditions, in the *relationships* they contribute to building and nurturing in the process, and in their ongoing efforts to *learn to work collaboratively toward these very goals*. As Babbitt emphasizes,

> There is no risk in perception and variation: if one doesn't like the results, one can look at things again the other way. Moreover, there is nothing particularly *morally* interesting about how one sees oneself or about how one sees others as a result of how one sees oneself (Babbitt 1999, 247).

While I would not put things quite this way (looking back to the case of Bunker, there does seem to be at least some risk involved in undoing a profound shift in perspective and focus; and morally speaking, inhabiting this risk would seem to take some courage, and to make a difference to his manners of thinking, acting, and relating to others), I agree that is important to push conversations of moral and political risk beyond the question of what risks are involved in coming to more accurately and faithfully represent oneself and

society in one's own thinking. In other words, processes of being "shaken out of" complacency with respect to especially complex ecological and social problems seem to involve more than the courage to *reexamine* oneself and society in conversation with differently situated others. It is to the task of supporting considerations such as these that I will now turn in Chapter 4, where I will discuss further what it means to be complacent, this time in the broader context of global climate change. Having taken some initial steps towards elaborating an account of complacency by identifying various dimensions of normative comfort as forms of character damage, in Chapter 4 I will proceed to examine how this damage comes to be embodied intrapsychically in the form of what I call *settled expectations of self-sufficiency*.

4. Climate Change and Complacency

> While crises do shake people out of their complacency, forcing them to question the fundamentals of their lives, the most spontaneous first reaction is panic, which leads to a "return to the basics": the basic premises of the ruling ideology, far from being put into doubt, are even more violently reasserted.
>
> - Slavoj Žižek

4.1. Introduction

Climate scientists, social scientists, and environmental ethicists have issued dire warnings. Current global greenhouse gas emissions trajectories exceed the worst-case scenario envisioned in the fourth and fifth reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2007), making it unlikely that the global average temperature will be held to a 2°C increase over preindustrial levels given present mitigation efforts. Societies worldwide are already coping with unusually frequent and intense weather events (heat waves, cold spells, "supercharged" storms), ecological disturbances (melting glaciers, rising sea levels, floods, droughts, wildfires), pressures to modify traditional agricultural practices, and compromised food and water security. Because emissions trajectories remain largely unaltered, increasing the chances of passing irreversible tipping points "beyond which climate dynamics can cause rapid changes out of humanity's control" (Hansen 2009, ix), current inaction has prompted experts to consider even more dangerous scenarios involving more than 3 or 4 degrees of warming (Smith et al. 2009). These scenarios force societies to face up to the imminent prospect of

devastating collapses of social and technical infrastructure, forced displacements and relocations of peoples, conflicts over lands and resources, and escalating losses of life, whether or not they have already been forced to deal with such tremendous catastrophes (UNHDR 2007/2008; UNEP 2009).

While climate change is undoubtedly a physical phenomenon, it is one built on complex economic, social, and political understandings and responses. The origins and impacts of climate change cannot be understood without taking into account complex histories of the transformation and domination of lands and of peoples under settler colonialism and other imperialist systems of rule, propelled by capitalist imperatives of economic growth and white supremacist, heteropatriarchal social orderings. Indeed, the causes, benefits, and burdens of environmental degradation have rarely been parceled equally on local, national, or global scales. Much less can climate change be understood in isolation from current patterns of socioeconomic inequality and political disempowerment that stand to be exacerbated within and among societies structured and expressed spatially along lines of gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, religion, age, and ability (Goldberg 1993, Ch. 8; Anthony 1995; Bryant 1995; Pulido 1996, 2000; Buckingman-Hatfield 2000; Westra & Lawson 2001; Shrader-Frechette 2002; Lawson 2008; Salleh 2008; MacGregor 2006, 2010ab, 2013). The most adverse effects of climate change are expected to fall disproportionately on communities of color around the globe, especially on women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities living in impoverished urban neighborhoods, coastal regions, and other areas with severe air quality issues, such as smog (Bullard 2008; Shiva 2012; MacGregor 2013). Indeed, as Chris Cuomo stresses, "climate change is a matter of global social justice" that is already intensifying the

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ecological and social vulnerabilities of large portions of the world's population, in many cases "precisely because they uphold ecological values that have not been engulfed by global capitalism and technological modernization" (Cuomo 2011, 693; 695; see also Cuomo 2002).

Hence the need to understand the causes, benefits, and burdens of climate change not only with regard to social relations and structural economic and political processes, but also in terms of how those relations and processes contribute to the organization of geographic regions or places in relation to one another. Laura Pulido has built a compelling case for examining the "sociospatial dialectics" through which pollution concentrations and ecological burdens more generally are determined—for example, through white flight from urban centers and suburbanization, which have often been directly subsidized by state-level and federal government agencies in the context of the United States. Although Pulido is particularly interested in the fact that racism, understood as a set of social relations, "shapes places and the relationships between places" (Pulido 2000, 33), similar arguments could also be developed focusing on classism, ageism, ableism and their complex intersections in relation to climate change. For example, Sherilyn MacGregor points out that,

> poor women are more likely to be hurt by natural disasters than men; women's provisioning work is made more difficult due to climate-change-related impacts; and economic and social breakdown caused by displacement causes a worsening of women's already low status in the face of that social breakdown (MacGregor 2013, 11).

As in the case of pollution concentrations, the devastation surrounding extreme weather events and ecological disturbances is "inevitably the product of relationships between distinct places, including industrial zones, affluent suburbs, working-class suburbs, and

downtown areas, all of which are racialized" (Pulido 2000, 13). Moreover, not only do the affluent and middle class tend to be physically located at a remove from more vulnerable areas (in industrialized Western nations, in inland suburbs, exurbs, and gated communities, which are typically sited away from higher density industrial areas and characterized, in part, by a relative lack of soil and water pollution and above average air quality), but the places these groups inhabit also tend to be better protected as a result of differential responses on the part of various government agencies to emergency situations, which are notoriously shaped by class and race (consider, for example, the responses of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to hurricanes Katrina and Sandy). Robert Bullard argues that, "Differential response is linked to "white privilege" that provides preferences for whites while at the same time disadvantaging blacks"—among other communities of color and poor whites, one might add—"making them more vulnerable to disasters and public health threats" (Bullard 2008, 777). Bullard and Pulido both remind us of the need to conceive of privilege in general, and of white privilege in particular, as "spatially expressed," which is to say, as "partially contingent upon a particular set of spatial arrangements" (Pulido 2000, 16).

Sorting out the responsibilities to be assigned and assumed in responding to climate change is a task that calls for broad-based participation. However, delegations from nation-states have persistently failed to elaborate and execute long-term coordinated response strategies, and surveys and polls suggest worrisomely low levels of public engagement within nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, to name just a few (Immerwahr 1999; Brewer 2005; Nisbet & Myers 2007; Leiserowitz

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2007, 2008; Upham et al. 2009; Newport 2008, 2010; Leiserowitz et al. 2011). These motivational challenges are particularly pressing within and among nations that have historically been among the highest emitters of industrial greenhouse gasses, and that continue along unsustainable pathways of resource extraction, production, consumption, and waste. In spite of detailed documentation of the role of corporate campaigns in promoting skepticism by generating misunderstandings of climate change (McCright & Dunlap 2000; McCright 2003, 2010; Michaels & Monfronton 2005; Jacques et al. 2008; Hoggan 2009; Jacques 2009; Oreskes & Conway 2010), reverberating through conversations on what is commonly called the "problem of inaction" or the "value-action gap" among communications specialists (Moser 2007, 2009, 2012; Moser & Dilling 2004, 2007; Moser & Walser 2008), social psychologists (APA 2009; Gifford 2011), social scientists (Eliasoph 1998; Cohen 2001; Blühdorn 2007; Norgaard 2011; Webb 2012), and geographers (Bulkeley 2000; Bulkeley & Moser 2007; Swyngedouw 2010), these motivational challenges remain puzzling. As political sociologist Ingolfur Blühdorn notes,

> Trying to *make sense* of the evident contradiction between late-modern society's acknowledgement that radical and effective change is urgent and inescapable and its adamant resolve to sustain what is known to be unsustainable is a hugely important and difficult task" (Blühdorn 2007, 272, original emphasis).

Meanwhile, accusations abound of widespread apathy, ignorance, denial, and—to the point of the present chapter—*complacency*. Charges of this sort signal that there is nothing benign about resting content with the status quo, passively allowing for the formation and implementation of misinformed, imprudent, and ethically suspicious policies and practices.

What exactly does it mean to be "complacent on climate change"? Getting a better handle on diverse forms of what we might think of as "motivational inertia" seems crucial to furthering political projects oriented toward reducing the harms of climate change. I take it that the unprecedented nature of the problem calls for the retooling of concepts that help us hold ourselves and others accountable in meaningful ways. For this reason, I want to help make "complacent" a weighty *political* charge—a charge that, along with "corrupt" and "cruel," picks out a "vice" that we need to go to work on remedying.

To be clear, complacency is one of several forms of motivational inertia standing in need of philosophical attention: apathy, indifference, resignation, and despair have all been subject to neglect (although see Geras 1998; Macy & Brown 1998; Tessman 2005, Ch. 4), and it is reasonable to suppose that all of these may be at work among different agents in relation to climate change. While the project of my dissertation is to develop an account of the specific phenomenon of complacency, I propose that philosophers should understand multiple forms of motivational inertia from within a general framework of *motivational vices*. Furthermore, there is cause to view these as species of what Lisa Tessman calls "ordinary vices of domination" (Tessman 2005, 54-79). Very roughly, a person should be seen as in the grips of a motivational vice when the ways she has been constituted as a moral agent prevent her from inquiring into, understanding, and responding well to a range of complex ecological and social problems. While the broader vision of vice I espouse is indebted to more traditional treatments of virtues and vices, it is distinguished by its focus on the relational dynamics and structural processes that contribute to fostering, sustaining, and enforcing various forms of motivational inertia. As discussed in Chapter 3, my account of complacency takes up Robin Dillon's call for

more work on "critical character theory" ((Dillon 2012; see also Tessman 2005, 2009). I

agree with Dillon that at least some of the ills of systemic domination and oppression,

and the mechanisms through which they are perpetuated, can be understood in terms of or

traced to certain structures or traits of character; and conversely, that liberatory struggles

need to engage with and go to work on repairing the vices of individuals. Dillon does not

describe hers a *relational* approach to understanding "character," "virtue," and "vice,"

however. Part of what distinguishes my own account is that it involves thinking both

critically and relationally about complacency and motivational vices more generally. For

this reason, I will draw upon and extend the work of feminist ethicists, critical

philosophers of race, and social moral psychologists, especially those who take relational

and structural approaches to understanding human motivational capacities (Nedelsky

1989, 1993; Campbell 1997, 1999, 2003; Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000; Walker 2003, 2007;

Downie & Llewellyn 2012) and the epistemic practices of socially situated agents (Mills

1997; Babbitt & Campbell 1999; Code 2006; Sullivan & Tuana 2007; Shotwell 2011).

I proceed as follows. In Section 4.2, I take up the recent work of Chris Cuomo and Susan

Sherwin on the ethical and political dimensions of climate change. I suggest that

Cuomo's discussion of the "insufficiency" problem and Sherwin's call for a "public

ethics" jointly point toward particularly promising strategies for reducing the harms of

climate change. In Section 4.3, I review extant philosophical treatments of complacency

before going on to argue that Nicholas Unwin's and Jason Kawall's accounts are

inadequate to the task of sorting out what it means to be complacent on climate change.

In Section 4.4 I offer an alternative account of complacency, building further upon the

work of Chapter 3. To anticipate: although complacency is commonly thought of in terms

of feelings of "self-satisfaction," I argue that regardless of an agent's self-directed feelings and explicitly held beliefs, they are complacent on climate change insofar as they are caught up in patterns of behaviour that express *settled expectations of self-sufficiency*. Examining the phenomenon of complacency through a critical feminist lens, I chart relationships between motivational inertia, privilege, and power by considering the circumstances under which changes in the behaviour and lifestyles of individuals are promoted and pursued as suitable responses to complex ecological and social problems. I also put into question depictions of complacency as a product of epistemic negligence for which individuals are solely and wholly responsible, and as a vice that individuals might "overcome" on their own initiative, resisting the temptation to reduce complacency to straightforwardly culpable ignorance or denial. Recognizing the urgent need to work collaboratively toward the creation of more just and sustainable societies, those who recognize the urgent need to start "shaking one another out of" their complacency on climate change should not expect their journeys to be easy, or to take place overnight, worthwhile though they may be.

4.2. Publicizing Climate Ethics
4.2.1. The "Insufficiency" Problem

No individual can even begin to slow the pace of climate change by reducing her own personal and household greenhouse gas emissions, even if she recognizes an ethical responsibility to do so. To make matters worse, should the vast majority of individuals and households the world over manage to drastically reduce their respective privately controlled emissions (changing light-bulbs, recycling more, riding bicycles, and so on),

their collective efforts would still be inadequate. Chris Cuomo dubs this the "insufficiency" problem (Cuomo 2011, 701). Her recent work on the ethical dimensions of climate change highlights the "rarely emphasized fact" that "household consumption and personal transportation account for a significant but minority slice of total greenhouse gas emissions worldwide," which means that, "Even if personal sphere reductions that can be directly controlled by individuals and households are ethically imperative, they are insufficient for adequate mitigation" (701).

Indeed, mitigating climate change is an extremely complex practical challenge that cannot be met solely through the efforts of ethically conscientious individuals acting qua individuals. It is a *political* challenge in addition to an ethically and practically demanding one, which is to say that citizens of industrialized nations are called upon to cultivate and exercise political agency together in recognition of responsibilities we share with others worldwide (Young 2006, 2011). Difficult choices and decisions need to be made concerning what and how much to produce and consume, and on what forms of energy to rely, with wide-ranging consequences for the ways of life of large numbers of differently located and situated peoples. Especially weighty claims have been pressed upon citizens of Western nations that have contributed the most to producing the industrial greenhouse effect over the last century and a half, and that continue along unsustainable pathways of resource extraction, production, consumption, and waste. When government and corporate agents in high-emitting Westerns nations persistently refuse to acknowledge their roles in causing climate change, and decline to take responsibility for addressing the problem, Cuomo suggests that for concerned citizens, "political activism, popular education, and effective coalitions may be even more

important than private-sphere mitigation efforts such as reducing one's own carbon footprint" (Cuomo 2011, 707).

In making such a claim, it is important to note that Cuomo should not be read as suggesting that private-sphere mitigation efforts are *not* relevant or important, and *a fortiori* that such efforts should *not* be undertaken by individuals. As she explains,

> if one knows her actions are part of a set of collective actions that together result in great harm, she must evaluate the rightness or wrongness of her contributions in light of the knowledge that others are also engaging in the activity, and together they create a cumulative effect. To make an anonymous contribution to a mob action is not to be blameless in relation to the cumulative harm caused (Cuomo 2011, 700-701).

Thus, "even if we are contributing only slightly to a great harm" as individual consumers of fossil fuels and chemicals, Cuomo argues persuasively that, "we ought to stop" (701). Her point, with which I agree for the most part, is that the responsibilities of an individual in relation to climate change are not limited to what is within her control in her own private life (i.e., personal and household emissions reductions), even if she ought to do what she can to contribute to mitigation efforts in the private sphere. In what follows, I can be read as adding, by way of the recent work of Susan Sherwin, that the responsibilities of an individual are not limited to what can be done *as an individual*, whether in the private or public spheres of life. That is, discharging certain responsibilities in relation to climate change requires, at the very least, collaboration and coordination—in visioning, acting, and reflecting—with other agents operating at the same and different level of human organization. In other words, certain responsibilities are irreducibly *interconnected*, which is to say that they can only be discharged in relation to the decisions and actions of other agents, for they cannot be adequately formulated in

terms of "*X* ought to do *y*," nor can they be enacted on the basis of such abstract formulations. For this reason, these responsibilities are not properly understood if regarded as "personal" or "individual" ones (see Isaacs 2011 on action descriptions in collective contexts; MacGregor 2013 on the uncritical feminization of private-sphere mitigation efforts; Section 4.2 below).

Cuomo's work on the ethical dimensions of climate change should give us pause for at least two reasons. First, many people living in the industrialized West have grown accustomed to the individualization of responsibility for addressing climate change, so much so that this particular division of responsibility and labor is in many cases simply taken for granted. What could account for the widespread acceptance of this particular strategy? As sociologist Janette Webb points out, it is not only prominent environmentalist groups who have been promoting the idea that changing light-bulbs, recycling more, riding bicycles, and planting trees are particularly effective ways of slowing the pace of climate change and of transforming into environmentally conscious citizens. The prevalence of these recommendations needs to be understood in the broader context of neoliberal micro-economic governance in nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, where government agencies have increasingly been drawing upon the expertise of behavioural psychologists (see APA 2009; Gifford 2011) and employing behaviour change technologies to enable the transformation of individuals into "green consumers," while incentives have been offered to induce the cooperation of some of the most visible environmentalist groups, or what are sometimes referred to as "Big Green" (e.g., differential allocation of government funding; donations from and

investment options with energy firms, including stocks and mutual funds—see Klein 2013ab).

One of the central aims of these strategies is to create a unified front by forging and making publicly available a consensus on the matter of how best to address climate change. The idea is to bring into alignment the agendas and communications campaigns of neoliberal economists, politicians, and prominent environmentalist groups. Thus, in response to the question of how best to strike a balance between the apparently contradictory requirements of economic growth through resource- and energy-intensive consumption on the one hand, and extensive reductions of greenhouse gas emissions on the other, a number of government agencies and environmentalist groups now agree that the best approach is to help shift patterns of personal and household consumption toward low-carbon alternatives by enabling individuals to make calculated adjustments in their own purchasing behaviours. Slavoj Žižek refers to this emerging ideological version of neoliberal capitalism as a "socially responsible eco-capitalism," which he describes as follows:

> While admitting that, in the past and in the present, the free market system has often been over-exploitative with catastrophic consequences, the claim is now made that one can discern the signs of a new orientation which is aware that the capitalist mobilization of a society's productive capacity can also be made to serve ecological goals [hence the proposed balance between the requirements of economic growth and extensive emissions reductions] (Žižek 2009, 34).

As Žižek goes on to explain, in this new version of neoliberalism,

> The basic ideological *dispositif* of capitalism—we can call it "instrumental reason," "technological exploitation," "individual greed," or whatever we like—is separated from its concrete socio-economic conditions (capitalist relations of production) and conceived of as an autonomous life or "existential attitude" which should (and can) be overcome by a new more

"spiritual" outlook, *leaving these very capitalist relations intact* (35, original emphasis).

Thus, what may seem to be proposals for wide-ranging structural changes are in fact merely proposals for superficial changes in the mindsets of participants in various markets, who continue to engage in or support exploitative practices as before, while re-legitimizing these practices under the banners of "social responsibility" and "ecological sensitivity." As Žižek points out, in the fight against the supposedly outmoded capitalist culture of conspicuous consumption and greed, "the compulsion (to expand) inscribed into the system itself is translated into a matter of personal sin, a private psychological propensity," for which individual consumers are blamed in a "disgusting spectacle of cheap moralization" (37). Meanwhile, the operations of markets and large corporations, including major energy firms (such as BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell, and Enbridge), are for all intents and purposes exempted from questions of government regulation and collective responsibility, while publicly funded government agencies, citizens, and undocumented residents are left to shoulder the burdens of market "externalities," such as the cleanup of air, soil, and water pollution.

In effect, current techniques and processes of resource extraction and distribution (notably, the extraction of fossil fuels, such as oil, through offshore drilling and the surface mining of tar sands; coal, through depth mining and mountain-top removal; and natural gas, through hydraulic fracturing or "fracking"), existing relations of production and manufacturing, and corporate waste practices are left to the discretion of powerful decision-makers in private industry, who are able to guide and respond to shifting conditions in various markets under limited regulatory constraints. To the extent that

these largely privately controlled processes, relations, and practices are in any way

subject to reorganization through processes of collective decision-making involving the

wider public, it is only through indirect, highly individualized means: primarily via

market mechanisms, where "consumer demand" is expressed as an aggregate of the

everyday choices of individual consumers given the limited options made available for

consumption. Thus, the author of the *Better World Shopping Guide* advises that,

> we must shift our own voices if we wish to be heard. As citizens, on average,
> we might vote once every four years, if at all. As consumers, we vote every
> single day with the purest form of power… money. The average American
> family spends around $18,000 every year on goods and services. Think of it
> as casting 18,000 votes every year for the kind of world you want to live in"
> (Jones 2010, 5).

Of course, this skirts over a rather important question that needs continually to be

pressed: whether the companies and corporations who are making available options for

energy and technology use, food, transportation, and so on would care about "the kind of

world you want to live in" if doing so did not also help them turn a profit; and, if not,

whether it makes any sense at all to keep relying on neoliberal markets to generate

"solutions" to the current climate crisis. Unless the world you are after is a lot like the

ecologically unsustainable one we are already living in, it seems flatly unreasonable to

expect to find options you feel excited about, or even comfortable with, "voting for."

Consider the extent to which the current situation of consumers is analogous to the

ceremonial decisions a monarch makes in a constitutional democracy: signing off on

measures that have been designed in advance by the current administration, the members

of which hold a monopoly on executive power (Žižek 2009, 134). Like monarchs,

consumers living in industrialized Western nations participate in maintaining the

appearance that they are meaningfully involved in making decisions about what and how

much to produce, consume, and dispose of, when the "voices" of the vast majority have been reduced to empty gestures of endorsement after the fact. That the author of *The Better World Shopping Guide* actually *celebrates* the imperative to "shift our own voices" demonstrates to what absurd lengths consumers, like monarchs with merely ceremonial powers, will go to protect their own dignity within the established order. The alternative, difficult though it may be, is to acknowledge the inability of that order to register what they actually think or want in moments of acute crisis, and to take it upon themselves to deliberate and make decisions concerning their collective futures together.

Meanwhile, environmentalists who refuse to participate in and instead publicly challenge the mitigation policies and practices proposed by neoliberal politicians (e.g., carbon trading, carbon offsets, and using natural gas as a "bridge fuel" to wean Western nations off dependency on oil), or who engage in direct action campaigns to disrupt the resource extraction and distribution projects of energy firms, are routinely branded as threats, labeled "extremists" or "eco-terrorists," and subjected to intense surveillance and criminalization (see, e.g., Shiva 2012, 22). In this way, the individualization of responsibility for addressing climate change leads to the *privatization* and *depoliticization* of crucially important areas of decision-making. Control over the direction of resource extraction, production, consumption, and waste is ceded to powerful decision-makers in private industry on the one hand, and to their market-mediated interactions with far less powerful consumers on the other, where degrees of consumer influence are a function of purchasing power. Collective processes of deliberation and public participation in decision-making are eschewed in favour of the injunction to "vote with your dollars"—regardless of whether "you" stand to be among those disproportionately affected by the

impacts of climate change, or whether "you" have very much money, and hence influence, to begin with. Concerns for equity and social justice are effectively sidelined and treated as irrelevant by this strategy for addressing climate change, for their expression is limited to the endorsement of particular goods, services, and companies through everyday commercial transactions.

One noteworthy effect of this mode of neoliberal micro-economic governance is that consumers are encouraged to develop the capacity for performing "carbon-calculus," effectively internalizing the long-term ecological costs of their everyday purchasing behaviours (Webb 2012, 116; see also Szasz 2007, 2011). By coming to make more informed, environmentally conscious decisions in markets currently "designed to associate satisfaction, prestige and self-worth with increasing consumption of carbon-intensive products" (Webb 2012, 119), those who have the financial means and wherewithal to "go against the grain" and become green consumers are led to see themselves as undergoing profound lifestyle changes, even as contributing to the creation of counter-cultures in relation to dominant patterns of goods and energy consumption. Meanwhile, insofar as the demands placed on the limited cognitive resources of individual consumers "leave little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society" (Maniates 2001, 33), one of the basic lessons absorbed through this mode of micro-economic governance is that, "we have to change radically, but within the contours of the existing state of the situation… so that nothing really has to change" (Swyngedouw 2010, 219; see also Dobson 2009).

On the basis of her case study of neoliberal micro-economic governance in Scotland, Webb argues that this strategy for dealing with climate change allows "the work of governance to proceed seemingly productively" (expert behavioural knowledge has been incorporated into public policy; some people have managed to become effective carbon-calculators), while ultimately offering "limited and largely self-defeating means of transition to a sustainable society" (Webb 2012, 121). Anticipating the response that the individualization of responsibility might yet hold promise insofar as individual consumers can gradually develop the capacity for more meaningful contributions to mitigation efforts by making more and more environmentally conscious purchases over time (moving on from changing light-bulbs to installing energy-saving household insulation and solar panels, and to investing in more fuel-efficient vehicles, for example), Webb notes that,

> This 'small steps' model is contested by a review of the evidence from evaluation studies (Thøgersen and Crompton, 2009), which concludes that there is no dependable link from 'simple and painless' change to progressive commitment to more major change (Webb 2012, 117-118).

Hence, it is not only the case, as Cuomo points out, that the individualization of responsibility is insufficient for adequate mitigation. In addition, Webb's research suggests that neoliberal strategy for enabling the transformations of individuals into green consumers is an inherently misguided means of implementing this particular division of responsibility and labor.

Some may worry that I am already implying, by way of the work of Cuomo and Webb, that to embrace any form of libertarianism or liberalism and a capitalist economy is, per force, to be complacent with respect to climate change—since, for example, each of these

political ideologies takes as its point of departure a picture of "the rights-bearing individual," and promotes the individualization of responsibility for addressing large-scale ecological and social problems. To be clear, I am making no such claim. It is my contention that discussions of matters political should be driven by the concrete problems that pose questions to political agents, not only or primarily by whatever theories agents have on hand to help frame and respond to these questions. I am not an adversary or a partisan of any particular political framework or ideology, nor do I take myself to be offering a polemic on behalf of one (see my discussion and rejection of ideal theory as a methodology for political philosophy in Chapter 1). I am, however, a philosopher who is interested in the relations of ideas, and in the effects certain ideas have on the behavior of agents of various types, including individuals. In this chapter I am emphasizing that a critical feminist lens is an invaluable resource when it comes to articulating viable responses to the complex social and ecological problems societies are currently facing worldwide. Those who describe themselves as feminists have certainly not invented these problems. However, feminisms do make possible the posing of questions that have not traditionally been addressed by libertarianism and liberalism—or, for that matter, by communitarianism, Marxism, and some classical variants of anarchism, as well as contemporary forms, including efforts to decolonize anarchism. Beyond this, I agree with Michel Foucault that it is possible to raise political questions that cannot be posed when peering through a critical feminist lens, or any other established political framework— these are "questions posed to politics," sometimes referred to as *problematizations*, which arise from the lived experiences of people living in a particular society (Foucault 1997). If those who describe themselves as liberals, capitalists, or liberal-democrat-capitalists

are made uncomfortable by the questions raised here, particularly those regarding the structural causes of and constraints on effective responses to climate change, then I imagine so too will sectarian Marxists, radical feminists, and others. I am more interested in unearthing a motivational vice and in tracing out its origins in contemporary industrialized societies. Whether "we" share this vice in common is a matter to be considered—struggled with, lived out, discovered, and so on—by all, where the "we" includes everyone grappling with how to interpret one another's behavior under the shadow of serious social and ecological crises.[17]

These reflections further underscore the relevance of Cuomo's argument, according to which it may be even more important for concerned citizens of Western nations to focus on discharging their political responsibilities in relation to climate change than to focus all or most of their attention on private-sphere mitigation efforts. Second, however, it is also worth noting that engaging in political activism, popular education, and forging effective coalitions need not mean struggling to create alternatives to unsustainable policies and practices through suitably democratic procedures. For example, some politically adversarial environmentalists have been mobilizing disturbing images and figures of projected ecological devastation in the hope of creating a sense of urgency around climate change that will move more people to get involved and participate in collective action. However, critical geographer Eric Swyngedouw warns that nurturing "apocalyptic imaginaries" of the world coming to an end has in fact become "an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism," for which a central leitmotif is the management of popular fear (Swyngedouw 2010, 219). Although apocalyptic

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[17] My thanks to Greg Scherkoske and Adam Auch for encouraging me to grapple with these questions and concerns.

imaginaries may help to "wake people from their slumbers," engendering intense senses

of urgency and a willingness to act in some cases, they also tend to be wielded as means

of skirting over or disavowing social conflicts and antagonisms, effectively clearing the

ground for invocations of Humanity as a unified agent of change while ignoring

differential vulnerabilities to the impacts of a changing climate and silencing the dissent

of marginalized, disempowered groups. Swyngedouw argues that stoking populist

sentiment in this manner,

> forecloses (or at least attempts to do so) politicization and evacuates dissent
> through the formation of a particular regime of environmental governance
> that revolves around consensus, agreement, participatory negotiation of
> different interests and technocratic expert management in the context of a
> non-disputed management of market-based socio-economic organization
> (227; see also Swyngedouw 2011).

Sherilyn MacGregor adds that,

> In many different ways, the universalization of the issue has resulted in a lack
> of structural analysis of both the root causes and the differential impacts of
> climate change. We are invited to debate the science and the conduct of
> scientists rather than to critically analyze the historical forces, hierarchical
> power relations, and value systems that have caused, and are standing in the
> way of addressing, the current predicament (MacGregor 2013, 11).

Much as neoliberal micro-economic governance works to channel the energies of

individual consumers into perpetuating an unsustainable and unjust status quo while

treating concerns for equity and social justice as irrelevant, I am concerned that efforts to

pressure government agencies into enacting specific policy reforms may lend undue

legitimacy to interest group politics, further entrenching depoliticized forms of public life

and silencing the dissent of less powerful, marginalized groups who stand to be

disproportionately affected by climate change. Of course, to point out that less powerful,

marginalized groups stand to be disproportionately affected by climate change is not to

say that other groups are safe, or will not be affected, simply by virtue of their gender, race, and class status, political influence, and so forth. What I am claiming is that certain groups are privileged in relation to others when factors such as differential government response, differences in income and other metrics of the material bases of resilience, relative ease of mobility, and so on, are taken into account, even though the lives and livelihoods of all are endangered by climate change (see discussions of differential ecological and social vulnerabilities in Bullard 2008; Cuomo 2011; MacGregor 2013). As a number of other authors have emphasized, climate change is, among other things, a matter of global social justice and ought, therefore, to be addressed in these terms. Thus, Swyngedouw underscores the need to turn "the climate question into a question of democracy and its meaning" (229)—not just a question of *whether* to engage in political activism, popular education, and so forth, but of *how to do so, with whom*, *through what forms of organization*, and *with what models of collective-decision making*.

Some might worry that meaningful, efficacious action toward mitigating climate change is not compatible with democracy, however conceived (e.g., in parliamentary, participatory, direct, and deliberative forms), and may require strict rationing and austerity of a kind not seen since nationwide mobilizations in preparation for World War II. As Suzanne C. Moser points out,

> Those most pessimistic about society's capacity to engender sufficient public engagement promote geo-engineering or mastery over climate and the environment, while those hopeful about policy, market, and technological solutions might favor "political engineering," and those most optimistic (and maybe most demanding) of individuals and human nature might bank on the promise of social engineering (Hulme 2008). Some propose a combination of these approaches that would resemble the wartime mobilization during World War II to get citizens and industry to fully support the war effort of the Allies against Nazism (e.g. Bartels 2001) (Moser 2009, 13).

I would resist this framing of the options as a choice among styles of "engineering," though, for this is a worrisomely depoliticized framing that covers over the taken-for-granted interests and values of its authors (whose "pessimism" or "optimism," on behalf of whom and what, is at issue here?). Out of the concerns for equity and social justice discussed above, and in recognition of the ongoing efforts of millions of poor people, indigenous peoples, and other people of color around the globe to build community, mobilize, and uphold or create durable forms of democratic organization for the sake of self-determination and the preservation of sustainable modes of life (maintaining, strengthening, or putting into practice such values as connection to place, earth-centeredness, inclusion, relational solidarity, and subsidiarity—see, e.g., Boggs 2011; Moore & Russell 2011; Simpson 2011; Crass 2012; Shiva 2012; Zibechi 2012), striving for the democratization of decision-making processes the outcomes of which have wide-ranging consequences for the lives and livelihoods of large numbers of differently located and situated peoples seems to me an indispensable, though certainly not uncomplicated aim. It is perhaps worth noting here that Swyngedouw has been criticized for overstating the "cozy post-political consensus" on climate change, and for neglecting politicized mobilizations on more local scales, despite evidence that local forms of dissent and resistance are alive and well (Kythreotis 2012, 461-462), as are struggles for recognition of the ways of knowing practiced by diverse indigenous peoples, and postcolonial arguments concerning the "ecological debt" owed to nations in the global South (Alfred 2005; Schlosberg & Carrothers 2010; Martinez-Alier 2002). At any rate, the question of what constitutes "meaningful" and "efficacious" action toward mitigating climate change is not prior to that of what values and goals are to be kept in view for the sake of reducing

the harms of climate change; who is to be involved as agents; and whose understandings of those values and goals end up mattering. Although mitigation is an immediate concern, coping well with present and future impacts—that is, coping in ways that are responsive to and involve all those who are most adversely affected—will require broad-based participation in processes of collective decision-making on a variety of scales and in a number of different arenas. How, after all, could any combination of "engineering" strategies possibly prepare diverse, internally heterogeneous groups of people to turn to one another and start engaging in the hard collective work of fending off and coping with severe ecological and social crises?

4.2.2. Toward a Public Ethics

In light of growing acknowledgement that the only responses to climate change that seem workable involve collective action, Susan Sherwin has issued a call for a new kind of ethics: a "public ethics" (Baylis et al. 2008; Sherwin 2009, 2012). Extending her earlier work on "relational autonomy" (Sherwin 1992, 1998, 2001ab, 2003), Sherwin attends to the many ways in which the activities of individuals, groups, and institutions are framed and constrained by the decisions and actions of agents operating at other "levels of human organization,"[18] reminding us how thoroughly intertwined are the actions of individuals and the organizations to which they belong. Although her earlier work focused on how the autonomy of members of oppressed groups tends to be limited by the reasonable options made available in specific circumstances (see also Frye 1983; Young

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[18] Sherwin invokes the term "level of human organization" to capture "any grouping that can demonstrate agency by taking on responsibilities," including "such categories as individual persons, family groups, governments of all levels, international bodies, corporations, churches, community groups, boards of education, health authorities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)" (Sherwin 2012, 22).

1990), Sherwin now appreciates that when it comes to responding to climate change, "even those individuals with privilege and power are caught up in patterns of behaviour that are contrary to their deepest interests" (Sherwin 2012, 27).[19] On her view, the problem is that many of us "lack the skills and infrastructure options necessary for making choices that give proper weight to the long-term consequences of the practices in which we collectively engage, and we find ourselves continually encouraged to focus on immediate gratification" (25).

By attending to infrastructure options in addition to the capacities and skills of individuals, Sherwin offers a way of thinking about the everyday behaviour of individuals that does not take for granted existing options for consumption and use as these are made available by powerful decision-makers in private industry and government. Instead, her approach involves putting under critical scrutiny the economic and social processes involved in the provision of particular options to differently located and situated peoples, and then considering possible alternative arrangements (an approach that is consonant with the methodology of naturalized nonideal theory discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.4). As Sherwin points out, the background conditions structuring available options for energy and technology use, food consumption, transportation, and so on tend to make it reasonable—even pragmatically "rational"—for individuals, groups, and organizations to be complicit in practices that depend on the excessive consumption of fossil fuels. Yet

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[19] Sherwin reserves the term "autonomy" to capture the sorts of circumstances that make possible "actions that are consistent with a person's broader interests, values, and commitments, including the well-being of her group (based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and so on)." By way of contrast, she uses the term "agency" to capture the sorts of circumstances where "a person reasonably chooses an option that is the most attractive or reasonable for her under the prevailing conditions but is incompatible with the overall interests of the groups to which that person belongs, and, hence, is in some sense incompatible with her own interests" (Sherwin 2012, 19).

altering those background conditions and reorienting the practices they support requires

carefully considering which agents would need to do what and for whom. For example,

where I live the ability of most people to reduce their dependency on fossil fuels is

constrained by the limited availability of reliable alternatives to driving a car. However,

the municipal government's ability to provide infrastructure for an improved public

transportation system is bound up with such factors as a lack of state-level funding,

corporate and labour interests in the sale of locally built vehicles, and the absence of a

critical mass of people willing to make use of buses and trains.

Sherwin worries that mainstream ethics offers little assistance in navigating situations of

this sort. Indeed, she claims that,

> the moral theories and systems that we have developed in the West are simply
> not up to identifying and providing guidance with respect to the complex
> *interconnections of responsibilities* that must be assumed if we are to avoid
> impending catastrophes (or deal appropriately with many already present
> disasters) (20, my emphasis).

Sherwin identifies four features of leading approaches to ethics that render them poorly

suited to addressing a problem as complex as climate change. First, these approaches

typically focus on assigning *one layer of duty to one type of agent at a time,* such as the

duties of individuals toward one another, or the duties of corporations to their

shareholders and stakeholders. Yet what is needed now is an approach that is "capable of

discussing the interconnections of moral responsibilities for many different types of

agents (that is, agents of many levels of human organization)," (21) for the actions of

agents operating at one level tend to limit the reasonable and attractive options made

available to other agents operating at the same and different levels. Second, the focus of

ethics has been limited to *one level of human organization at a time*, for there has been a

tendency to focus on either the interpersonal, the interorganizational, or the international levels of interaction, reinforcing a division of labour among moral philosophers, specialized applied ethicists (e.g., environmental ethicists, bioethicists, business ethicists, engineering ethicists), and political philosophers. Yet what is needed now is an ethics that is capable of attending to "multiple levels of human organization simultaneously," (21) for the actions of a number of different agents need to be coordinated across several different levels. Third, ethics has sought out *universally applicable, context invariant rules* that can be identified in the abstract without attending to particularities of identity, interest, situation and place, or to unequal relations of power and influence within and among communities and societies. However, as a number of feminist ethicists have argued, "the scope of ethics should not be limited to a set of injunctions and norms that can be identified in the absence of any contextual details" (21). Finally, ethics has focused primarily on *matters of duty*, when it "should be concerned with the process and substance of determining how we will assign and assume the specific responsibilities associated with the various actual needs that arise within particular social units" (21).[20] For instance, those occupying particularly vulnerable ecological and social positions ought to be heavily involved in sorting out whose needs are to be met, how, and by whom, in recognition of the historical injustices and harms that have put them in the way of yet further harm in relation to climate change (Lawson 2008, 2-3; Cuomo 2011, 693-695).

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[20] I take it that Sherwin is relying upon one prominent way of drawing a distinction between matters of *duty* and *responsibility* here. As Iris Marion Young explains, "When we have a duty, moral rules specify what it is we are supposed to do: for example, "Honor they father and thy mother." Responsibility, however, while no less obligatory, is more open as to what actions it calls for. One has the responsibility to do whatever it takes to bring about specific ends or purposes. Taking responsibility also involves more discretion than enacting a duty does. It is up to the agents who have a responsibility to decide what to do to discharge it within the limits of other moral considerations" (Young 2011, 143).

Moving beyond the limitations of mainstream ethics, Sherwin envisions a public ethics of the sort that would be capable of navigating the "distressingly complex array of coordination problems" associated with efforts to address climate change (Sherwin 2012, 23). The primary task for a public ethics is to sort out the responsibilities properly assigned to each agent (that is, to agents at each level of human organization) *in relation to the others*, for "agents of many sorts must take action, and the options available to each agent are likely to be determined by decisions at other levels" (24). While Sherwin is proposing a way of circumnavigating the difficulties plaguing mainstream ethics, it is important to note that she is not articulating a substantive solution, nor is she purporting to be capable of doing so on her own. By her estimates, elaborating a public ethics will require collaboration on the part of "an interdisciplinary, international collection of scholars, activists, practitioners, and communicators," drawing upon "empirical as well as theoretical knowledge, including expertise in human behaviour, politics, economics, national and international law, religion, and the ability to stimulate moral imagination" (25). An easily overlooked feature of Sherwin's approach is that learning to work collaboratively at and across levels of human organization is necessary both to *sorting out* the responsibilities that urgently need to be assumed by agents of many different types, as well as to *enacting* those very responsibilities. After all, no single agent or agency evinces the experience, expertise, and skills required for devising and implementing long-term response strategies that take into account anything close to the full battery of ethical, epistemic, and political concerns bound up with climate change.

It is also worth noting that Sherwin's call for a public ethics takes seriously the fact that, "a multi-scale, multi-actor vision of responsibility for climate protection is beginning to

be realized" in the absence of more effective negotiations and other action at the international level, regardless of how responsibilities are assigned and assumed in particular contexts (Bulkeley & Moser 2007, 8). Because policy agendas and alternative practices are already being designed, implemented, and contested by agents at a number of different levels of human organization and in various arenas, Harriet Bulkeley and Suzanne C. Moser point out that, "an approach to climate protection governance which recognizes its multi-scalar and networked nature is not only conceptually necessary but also an empirical reality" (5). Some of the key questions now are: What are the implications of these developments, and what role can a public ethics play in navigating the specific coordination problems to which they give rise? For while the reality of a multi-scalar and networked approach to climate governance challenges depictions of "lower-level" agents (e.g., municipalities, regional networks, sub-national government actors, activist groups, churches) as merely the "implementers" of higher-level policies (6-7), it also raises the issues of whether fragmented attempts to respond to climate change can possibly rise to the challenge of adequate mitigation, and of what forms of horizontal and vertical coordination are possible and desirable for whom. By focusing on the practical question of which agents would need to do what, how, and for whom to increase the relational autonomy of all types of agents who seek to collaborate and coordinate their actions with respect to the goal of avoiding climate catastrophe, a public ethics can help navigate these developments in a way that is sensitive to the diverse values, interests, and commitments of the agents involved, as well as to concerns of equity and social justice, without losing sight of time constraints and limited resources.

In summary, Cuomo emphasizes that personal sphere emissions reductions are insufficient for adequate mitigation given the options currently available to most citizens in the industrialized West. Webb and others have identified currently circulating behaviour change technologies as ineffective, possibly even self-defeating means of transitioning to sustainable societies. Given that the individualization of responsibility for addressing climate change is not only insufficient in principle but also misguided in practice, it is difficult to understand how ethically reflective persons living in high-emitting nations would not see the need to work collaboratively in devising and implementing long-term coordinated response strategies. Nevertheless, the need to work collaboratively itself seems to present too great a challenge for many of us.

4.3. Climate Change and Complacency

What does it mean to be "complacent on climate change"? While many of those who are already engaged on climate change tend to recognize complacency as a serious worry, we will not find much assistance from philosophers in understanding this concept: only two philosophy articles have been published on the topic, and the first is quite narrow in its focus. In this section I will review Nicholas Unwin's and Jason Kawall's respective accounts of complacency (Unwin 1985; Kawall 2006) before going on to argue that neither is adequate to the task of sorting out what it means to be complacent on climate change.

4.3.1. Unwin on "Moral" Complacency

Unwin focuses his attention on "moral complacency," which, he suggests, is "is not a doctrine but a state of mind" (Unwin 1985, 205). He advances the plausible-sounding claim that moral complacency is "normally defined as a general unwillingness to accept that one's moral opinions may be mistaken" (205). Although refusals to countenance criticism may "come about for a number of reasons," Unwin is interested in one reason in particular: "because it is believed that there is nothing more to moral truth than moral opinion itself," given that "each culture has the right to determine its own obligations" (206)—propositions that are commonly associated with moral relativism.

The central question driving Unwin's paper is whether moral complacency is licensed by moral relativism in light of the fact that critics of relativism tend to answer this question in the affirmative. Because his main concern is to defend moral relativism against the charge that it leads to complacency, rather than to understand complacency *per se*, his argument to that effect need not detain us here. On Unwin's view, an agent is morally complacent insofar as she is unwilling to listen to anyone who challenges her moral opinions, for the simple reason that she refuses to accept the possibility of error. So, what makes complacency vicious for Unwin is its rootedness in epistemic negligence. His implied remedy is straightforward: all we need to do to "overcome" complacency is to remind ourselves and others that even radical forms of moral relativism do not entail the impossibility of error, nor do they entail that even differently situated and encultured others could not possibly know as much about our own local morality as we do.

The trouble with Unwin's admittedly brief discussion of complacency, as I see it, is that he could just as easily have been reflecting on the meaning of arrogance, dogmatism, or

some other largely intellectual vice, each of which could plausibly be corrected through more responsible epistemic practice. For example, while outright dogmatism immunizes a person from the criticisms of others, developing a fallibilist outlook could make that person more willing to take the consensus statements of climate scientists seriously, and to revise their opinions on what they ought to be doing in response to climate change. Yet this newfound openness to revising moral opinions would not necessarily appease the worries that seem to motivate charges of complacency in the context of the magnitude and complexity of climate change. After all, such worries do not only or primarily arise in contexts of inquiry, when interlocutors stubbornly refuse to reconsider their avowed opinions in light of available evidence (although there are also plenty of "climate skeptics" and "climate deniers," to be sure). Rather, worries about complacency arise primarily in practical contexts, especially when inaction is the dominant response to a manifest problem the existence and nature of which is already well understood, and when those who are implicated in the problem seem to feel just fine about themselves in spite of doing very little to take responsibility for addressing the situation. In other words, the charge, "you're complacent on climate change" is not merely motivated by the need for a person to shift their "state of mind," but by perplexity and disappointment, if not outrage, over widespread patterns of behaviour that express an "adamant resolve to sustain what is known to be unsustainable" (Blühdorn 2007, 272).

4.3.2. Kawall on Complacency as a "Vice of Inattention"

Kawall offers a more sophisticated account of complacency, responding directly to Unwin. A virtue ethicist by trade, Kawall takes for granted that complacency "seems an

especially common and troubling vice" that "works quietly, an often subtle drift into an easy self-satisfaction with one's efforts and accomplishments (no matter how meager)" (343). He argues that the *OED* defines the concept too broadly,[21] and that Unwin's account has several additional shortcomings. First, Unwin risks defining complacency too narrowly, for his account fails to "explicitly require any sort of epistemic culpability, or sense of self-satisfaction," and yet complacency "seems to require that one overestimates one's own positive status in an epistemically culpable fashion, leading to an excessive self-satisfaction" (247, 343). Secondly, Unwin's account is not comprehensive enough, for it cannot "accommodate cases where one embraces appropriate moral standards, but culpably overestimates how well one's actions satisfy these standards" (347). Third and finally, an unwillingness to accept moral criticism seems too strong a requirement for complacency, for a person who "simply never contemplates the possibility that her moral standards could be flawed seems complacent (assuming a sense of self-satisfaction, etc.), even if she would be willing to accept that her moral opinions could be flawed, if she were ever to actually reflect on the matter" (347).

Moving beyond the limitations of Unwin's account, Kawall claims that complacency is distinguished by *inappropriate* or *unjustified* feelings of self-satisfaction, and that to qualify as complacent a person must be *excessively* satisfied with her own level of performance or achievement. Whereas Unwin focuses on a distinctively moral variety of complacency, Kawall proposes further that, "a person might be complacent about certain matters and not others, and… one may be complacent with respect to both moral and non-moral projects" (345). So, on his account a person could qualify as complacent with

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[21] As Kawall points out, the *OED* defines complacency as "The fact or state of being pleased with oneself; tranquil pleasure or satisfaction in one's own condition or doings; self-satisfaction."

respect to *x* (*y, z*…) because she mistakenly believes herself to have performed well and

feels excessively self-satisfied on that basis. Kawall doubts that unjustified belief is

sufficient for complacency, though, for a person might be unaware of many facts that are

relevant to evaluating her performance without being culpably ignorant for all that. On

his view, it is not mere ignorance but rather *epistemic irresponsibility* that makes

complacency vicious. As he explains,

> The crucial epistemic flaw… is not unwarranted or unjustified belief
> concerning one's level of achievement or status, but beliefs formed in an
> epistemically irresponsible (culpable) manner. If a person simply has
> unreliable faculties and lacks epistemic access to this fact, she does not
> thereby seem to exhibit the problematic epistemic negligence or
> irresponsibility we associate with complacency (348).

Thus, Kawall proposes the following definition:

> Complacency (with respect to some good or project G): is constituted by (i)
> an epistemically culpable overestimate of one's accomplishments or status
> that produces (ii) an excessive self-satisfaction that produces (iii) an
> insufficiently strong desire or felt need to maintain (or improve to) an
> appropriate level of accomplishment, that in turn produces (iv) a problematic
> lack of appropriately motivated, appropriate action or effort (346).

Notice that to be charged with complacency in Kawall's proposed sense, there must be

certain standards of "appropriateness" in ongoing action or effort about which a person

could fail to responsibly form beliefs. How might these standards be established? Kawall

offers the following remarks in passing:

> Often appropriate levels of action and effort will be largely established by a
> given practice (morality, professional basketball, etc.); there are certain levels
> of achievement that are expected of practitioners (though some accounting for
> an individual's particular talents, weaknesses, and so on, might be required).
> Beyond this, an individual's personal commitment to a given goal, practice, or
> project will typically be relevant (348).

So, Kawall recommends appealing to whatever standards have been established by practices that have *already* been implemented, some of which are evident enough in his example of climate-related complacency:

> Consider an individual who, in reflecting on his impacts upon the environment, holds that "Well, sure I'm not perfect—I'm not some environmental saint. But I do alright; I'm basically a good environmental citizen." He then drives away in his SUV to his massive house with its three-car garage, etc. This individual is complacent about his environmental impacts—he simply assumes that he is acting appropriately, and does not recognize a strong need to improve his behavior (344).

The SUV driver's motivational inertia must be rooted in irresponsibly formed beliefs, supposes Kawall. After all, how could he possibly believe that driving around in an SUV is compatible with being a "good environmental citizen," when the "atrocious mileage and comparatively high level of emissions from these vehicles are quite well-known and this information is easily accessible" (352)? If the SUV driver is committed to ongoing mitigation efforts, yet fails to acquire this bit of "common knowledge," and "cannot be bothered to investigate the matter" (352), then he should not be let off the hook for his motivational inertia. As Kawall puts it, "Complacency, with its easy self-satisfaction and lack of effort constitutes a paradigmatic case of vicious negligence and inadequate concern for one's projects and achievements," which leads a person to "stop short" and "rest content with their achievements or efforts, either failing to make any further efforts at all ("I've already done enough"), or only proceeding with inadequate efforts and actions" (353, 344).

In summary, on Kawall's view individuals engage in practices against the background of established performance standards, and "succumb to" complacency when they irresponsibly understand themselves to have lived up to those standards. His account of

complacency has at least three advantages. First, it allows us to distinguish complacency from intellectual vices such as arrogance and dogmatism, which is an improvement over Unwin's account (see Section 4.3.1). Second, it allows us to distinguish complacency from other practical and moral vices such as apathy, indifference, hypocrisy and resignation, which, as Kawall points out, can easily be muddled together (349-353). Third and finally, the practical upshot of his account is simple: all we need to do to avoid "lapsing into" complacency is responsibly form beliefs concerning what the practices to which we are committed demand of us as individuals, such as those involved in ongoing mitigation efforts, and then diligently monitor our own performance whilst engaged in those practices. (The same goes for "overcoming" complacency.)

4.3.3. Problems for Kawall's Account

Kawall's account of complacency can be understood as a contribution to a much broader field of inquiry known as "environmental virtue theory," which features analyses of several distinctively "environmental vices" (see van Wensveen 2000; Sandler & Cafaro 2005; Sandler 2007).[22] Philosophers working in this field begin from the recognition that a great deal of popular literature on environmental issues already employs the language of virtue to provide inspiration and guidance to concerned citizens, offering "thicker" descriptions of what makes for a good environmental citizen than is possible when employing the language of rights, obligations, and right action alone. In addition, Louke van Wensveen suggests that,

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[22] When I speak of "proponents of environmental virtue theory" in what follows, I am referring to authors of the manuscripts and collections cited here.

One reason for the flourishing of ecological virtue language may simply be that this is how, at least in the West, we tend to talk when we are worried and would like to see things change. Virtue discourse, in Western languages, connotes a combination of intention and action that shows a seriousness about thorough and lasting change. It is the discourse we use when we are willing to make commitments and to express these publicly. (Think, for example, of the role of terms like *courage* and *loyalty* during wartime or terms like *responsibility* and *caring* in the family values debate.) Since ecologically minded people tend to perceive the current environmental crisis as extremely serious, it should not be surprising if they resort to those traditional linguistic constructions that connote active commitment, even if they do not call this language by its traditional name (van Wensveen 2005, 18-19).

It is worth noting that when van Wensveen speaks of "thorough and lasting change," she is referring to "a change from present social structures to ecological societies" which, "in the viewpoint of many," can be fostered through "the cultivation of appropriate attitudes" (26). Although she acknowledges that virtue and vice terms "carry the stigma of sounding old-fashioned, preachy, and self-righteous," van Wensveen argues that ecological virtue language is hardly aligned ideologically with "the modern worldview," so it is by no means conservative in *that* particular sense. Instead, she casts ecological virtue language as a dynamic, emerging discourse that is bound up with the evolving realities of "the environmental movement," and that promises to generate "fresh ways of looking at problems and dilemmas that are already getting stale (such as the question of whether rivers have rights)" (18, 27-28). Because ecological virtue language resonates with pre-modern traditions of thought and practice on the one hand, and with wide-ranging criticisms of modern images of nature and of human-nature relations on the other, van Wensveen claims that taking up this discourse through the lens of philosophical virtue ethics "could have surprisingly radical effects," perhaps even giving citizens in the industrialized West "a *good* chance at achieving moral breakthroughs" (28, 27, original emphasis). By drawing upon and elaborating ecological virtue language, proponents of

environmental virtue theory aim to shed new light on environmental problems, helping to create thorough and lasting change by shifting dominant attitudes toward human-nature relations.

I am far less optimistic than van Wensveen about the "radical" potential of environmental virtue theory in general, and of Kawall's account of complacency in particular. Thus, in this section I will argue that Kawall fails to provide an account that is adequate to understanding what it means to be complacent with respect to climate change. There are three related reasons for this, each having to do with the general approach to understanding "character," "virtue," and "vice" that contributors to environmental virtue theory share in common. I will elaborate each of these critical rejoinders in detail below after introducing them briefly here. First, Kawall's account of complacency is premised on little or no analysis of the structural causes of complex ecological and social problems, which leads to the uncritical endorsement of a fundamentally misguided strategy for addressing climate change. Second, although his account purports to be universal in scope, it actually takes a certain kind of human being as its model: namely, a middle or upper class person of considerable financial means, who is presented with a range of options in a variety of everyday circumstances yet consistently fails to opt for low-carbon alternatives. Third, his account encourages us to understand complacency as existing entirely "inside" individuals, and to hold individuals solely and wholly responsible for acquiring and correcting this particular motivational vice, while treating "character" and "the system" as entirely distinct, causally unrelated concerns.

Because Kawall's approach to understanding "character," "virtue," and "vice" has been adopted by several other contributors to environmental virtue theory, some of whom make their guiding assumptions explicit, I will make reference to the work of several of his fellow travellers in the course of developing my critique of his account of complacency. First, Kawall's account is premised on little or no analysis of the structural causes of complex ecological and social problems, which leads to the uncritical endorsement of a fundamentally misguided strategy for addressing climate change. To be clear, I am claiming that this is a necessary feature of Kawall's account, and not merely a failure of its proper application, because his account takes the performance of individuals as the primary locus of evaluation—a choice that I will be challenging in what follows. Although the subject matter of environmental virtue theory is persons and their lives, I take it that it is not possible to provide adequate characterological guidance to differently positioned and situated persons without taking into account the broader structural problems to which they are collectively contributing by their actions, as well as who stands to be affected by these problems and in what ways. So, theories of character, virtue, and vice need to make reference to normative theories of other sorts—that is, theories which offer diagnoses of the structural causes of particular problems, and which recommend strategies for bringing about structural change (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4). I also take it that proponents of environmental virtue theory would generally agree with these points if pressed, for in some ways they seem to endorse them already. However, instead of making explicit the normative background guiding their inquiries into character, these authors tend to take for granted particular analyses of the causes of environmental problems, without elucidating the contents of these analyses, explaining

why they ought to be endorsed, or explaining what kinds of expertise they are premised upon. For example, in his contribution to a recent collection called *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, Peter S. Wenz claims, without supporting argument, that, "Current environmental problems stem largely from consumerism in industrial countries, such as the United States" (Wenz 2005, 198). According to Wenz, consumerism is "the linchpin" of environmental degradation worldwide, for it is a lifestyle that relies on a cluster of related vices, including intemperance, selfishness, and indifference, as well as six of the seven deadly sins (greed, avarice, gluttony, envy, luxury, and pride) which are harmful both to nature and to people (197). Judging by Kawall's references to SUVs, gigantic houses, and three-car garages, he seems to agree with Wenz that consumerism ought to be the primary focus of attention when seeking to understand specific environmental vices such as complacency, and when prescribing remedies that will help bring about desirable personal change—and derivatively, social and infrastructural change.

However, while consumerism is unquestionably a major concern, an exclusive focus on patterns of private sphere consumption either neglects to take into consideration the extent to which institutionalized processes of resource extraction, modes of production, and waste practices contribute to present emissions levels, or else unrealistically treats personal and household consumption as the primary mechanisms driving of all of the above. Yet in 2008, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reported that roughly 19% of carbon emissions nationwide were from the commercial sector, 27% were from the industrial sector, and 32% were from transportation, only half of which could be attributed to the use of personally owned vehicles. Furthermore, the vast majority of non-carbon greenhouse gas emissions, such as methane, nitrous oxide, and

hydrofluorocarbons, were from the agricultural, industrial, and commercial sectors (EPA 2010). Individual consumers may well have *some* degree of influence on what and how much is produced, consumed, disposed of, and so on, indirectly influencing emissions levels in these various sectors. Nevertheless, it would be a serious mistake to suppose that, "environmental problems stem largely from consumerism" when this claim has not been—and in all likelihood, *cannot be*—substantiated by way of structural analysis, for the actions and interactions of many agents other than individual consumers are clearly implicated in a problem of the shape and magnitude of climate change, as are the background conditions against which they are poised to act. Because Kawall's approach to understanding complacency on climate change is premised on an unsubstantiated, woefully partial diagnosis of the ecological pathologies of industrialized Western nations, it ends up encouraging individual citizens to channel all of their energies into reorienting their own behaviour and lifestyles to conform with standards of conduct that have already been established, while leaving existing institutional arrangements and social relations in place. Thus, his account provides ideological support for what is known to be an inadequate mitigation strategy (see Section 4.2.1). The problem is not just that becoming "green consumers" is insufficient for adequate mitigation. Rather, it is the uncritical endorsement of the individualization of responsibility, and the consequent promotion of the idea that "overcoming complacency on climate change" means internalizing and living up to individualized performance standards in feats of private heroism.

Second, although Kawall's account of complacency purports to be universal in scope, it actually takes a certain kind of human being as its model: namely, a middle or upper class person of considerable financial means, who is presented with a range of options in a

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variety of everyday circumstances yet consistently fails to opt for low-carbon alternatives. The privileging of a particular set of social experiences and circumstances is hardly uncommon among proponents of environmental virtue theory, especially in conversations on environmental vice. Consider the following remarks from Philip Cafaro:

> To some degree our political, economic, and technological systems present us with environmentally unsustainable choices or strongly incline us in those directions. Our politicians fund highways, not bike paths or mass transit; corporate advertising stimulates environmentally costly desires, rather than encouraging contentment with what we have. Still, as consumers and citizens we usually have real choices, and we often choose the environmentally worst ones. No one forces us to buy big SUVs, build three-car garages, or let our bicycles rust. [Rather,] we do these things because we are not the people we should be. Our poor environmental behaviour stems, in part, from particular character defects or vices. Among the most important of these are gluttony, arrogance, greed, and apathy (Cafaro 2005, 135).

Like Kawall, Cafaro presents his analyses of specific environmental vices as applicable to all citizens of Western nations, making use of the inclusive "we" and "our" when describing the circumstances and behaviour of individuals. But of course, only a small segment of the population at issue has the option of buying big SUVs and three-car garages in the first place, let alone the experience of feeling "forced" to do so (perhaps for the sake of status, or to transport children to hockey tournaments, or to go on a getaway to the family cabin once a month?). It would be strange indeed for a wealthier person living in the United States to believe that driving an SUV and living in a gigantic house is compatible with being a "good environmental citizen" when there are other, less energy- and resource-intensive options available to them, so it is understandable that Cafaro and Kawall work backwards from patterns of ecologically unwise decision-making to specific character flaws or defects. As Cafaro puts it, "those of us who care about nature have a responsibility to *choose wisely* in our everyday environmental

decisions. The failures of our neighbors, or our leaders, do not absolve us from our personal environmental responsibilities" (136, my emphasis).

However, for many people living in the industrialized West, the background conditions structuring available options for energy and technology use, food consumption, transportation, and so on tend make it reasonable—even pragmatically "rational"—to be complicit in practices that depend on the excessive consumption of fossil fuels (see Section 4.2.2). Although members of certain social groups may "usually have real choices," owing to such factors as elite education, personal income, inherited property and wealth, and relative ease of mobility, an account of complacency that universalizes these very particular, enabling circumstances and resources generates unrealistic expectations of members of less favourably situated groups. Thus, it reinforces the myth that anyone can become a "good environmental citizen" through sheer determination and strength of will, and that those who fail to "choose wisely" must somehow be intrinsically defective. Moreover, by focusing on "personal responsibilities," an account of this sort reinforces the myth that members of more socioeconomically advantaged and politically empowered groups would be "doing their part" to address climate change by significantly reducing their own personal and household emissions, when the individualization of responsibility is known to be insufficient for adequate mitigation. Perhaps efforts to differentiate oneself in these ways from the "failures of our neighbours, or our leaders" need to be put in check, along with presumed partitionings of personal responsibility, in recognition of how socially inflected ignorance and competitive individualism tend to get in the way in efforts to forge more cooperative modes of response.

Now, perhaps it would be overstating my case to deny that the highly educated, affluent citizen, deliberately living in a small, energy-efficient home, riding a bike, buying local, and so on, is "less complacent" than their counterpart SUV driver in Kawall's story. After all, I agree with Cuomo that efforts to reduce personal sphere emissions are among the responsibilities of citizens of industrialized Western nations (see Section 4.2.1). However, I would hazard, first, that complacency is not among the SUV driver's most immediately pressing problems. Even when described so thinly and suggestively, the SUV driver seems to lack the degree of understanding, caring, and commitment that is, arguably, required to qualify as complacent in the first instance. Furthermore, even if there are many who manifest more worrisome forms of motivational inertia, and granting that complacency is a matter of degree, the heroic green consumer is still dangerously complacent in my proposed sense. If to be complacent with respect to climate change is to be such as to fail to have dispositions of thought and action needed to contribute to dealing sensitively and effectively with an especially complex problem, then even an agent who tries really hard to solve that problem through personal sphere measures will qualify as complacent. After all, such an agent may well have the critical character flaw of expecting to be able to discern what to do on his or her own, and end up behaving in ways which suggest that acting alone, qua individual, is what it means to "do their part." I admit that it may initially sound odd to the ear to say that someone who is trying as hard as our heroic green consumer is still complacent, let alone a paradigmatic case of complacency. Yet here it may help to remind ourselves of Samantha, the white New York City police officer from Chapter 3. Although Samantha makes a sincere effort to see everyone "just as a human being" and does not espouse any racially prejudiced beliefs,

her performance records show that she stopped-and-frisked twice as many blacks as whites on suspicion of drug possession while walking the beat over the last month. Because Samantha persists in treating racism and racial oppression as functions of the attitudes of individuals, and is unable or unwilling to conceive of these problems systemically, taking account of the numerous interconnected laws, institutions, incentive schemes, and practices that collectively constitute mass incarceration as a racialized system of social control, not only does she remain ignorant of the present realities of racial oppression in the United States, but there is also a sense in which she is, perhaps through little or no fault of her own, complacent with the respect to the mass incarceration of people of color. So too, of course, is "race-conscious Bunker," even though, unlike Samantha, he has managed to undergo a profound shift in perspective and focus in the course of beginning to undo his white ignorance.

Third, Kawall's account encourages us to understand complacency as existing only "inside" individuals, and to hold individuals solely and wholly responsible for acquiring and correcting this motivational vice, while treating "character" and "the system" as entirely distinct, causally unrelated concerns. Once again, these are consequences of the general approach to understanding "character" shared in common by contributors to environmental virtue theory. For example, Cafaro claims that, "when we assert that particular social arrangements are unfair or unjust, we locate the primary evil in "the system." Vice terms, in contrast, locate the evil squarely within people" (Cafaro 2005, 153-154, n.1). Yet in a structurally unjust society, I worry that when complacency is mistakenly depicted as a vicious state of mind existing entirely "inside" individuals, what may at first glance seem to be plausible remedies actually end up *fostering and sustaining*

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complacency on climate change. Consider an SUV driver who, upon suddenly "awakening" from his "vice of inattention" (Kawall 2006, 353), notices that each of his suburban neighbours have traded in for hybrids, sold their gigantic houses, and started planting rooftop gardens next to the solar panels they've installed on their new condo buildings. He wonders how he could have allowed himself to be so blinded to the reality of climate change for so long and decides he had better do the same. Then, while driving his hybrid to the farmer's market to pick up some organic fruit, he marvels at the "sheer negligence" of people living in that inner city neighbourhood who let city officials place a toxic waste incinerator near their homes. "When will those people get with the program?" he wonders.[23]

What makes our former SUV driver complacent? *Contra* Kawall, it is not first and foremost that he irresponsibly takes himself to be a "good environmental citizen." Notice, though, that Kawall and other proponents of environmental virtue theory depict adult humans as fully "rational," autonomous agents existing prior to or outside of interpersonal and institutional contexts characterized by unequal relations of power and influence, while treating these relations as irrelevant to understanding the formation, development, and evaluation of particular structures or traits of character. Having abstracted away from systemic issues of power and the modes of its organization and use in specific circumstances, Kawall casts complacency as a vicious state of mind existing

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[23] As Bill Lawson astutely points out, "Environmentalists have often claimed that urban residents have not taken steps to ensure that they have protected their living space. This view assumes that it is the responsibility of each group to protect its space and that failure to protect one's space is one's own fault. This view takes social responsibility off the government and puts the weight solely on those groups that are usually unable to muster local or national support for their environmental interests. It also places the weight for urban environmental programs on the residents of urban America. If environmentalists take either of these positions, it signals a break between environmental issues and social concerns of justice" (Lawson 2001, 52). In a more constructive vein, Lawson suggests that, "Environmentalists must be involved in urban planning with those persons most affected by urban pollution: poor persons of color" (52).

"inside" individuals, who are called upon to take responsibility for their epistemic negligence by paying closer attention to and internalizing accessible standards of conduct. And that is just what our former SUV driver does: he internalizes the individualized performance standards established in his suburban neighbourhood, judging these as credible guides to action on the basis of the social experiences and core beliefs he has accumulated from the eco-social location he and his neighbours share in common. Yet as discussed in Section 4.2, private sphere mitigation efforts are insufficient for adequate mitigation. Because those with the financial means and wherewithal to excel in these efforts are led to see themselves as undergoing profound lifestyle changes, they risk deluding themselves into thinking they have "done their part," while distancing themselves from responsibilities that could not be discharged on their own, and are in that sense *unpartitionable*. Although our former SUV driver may be held accountable for lacking critical self-awareness of his own eco-social location, I would resist the temptation to suppose that, "he should have known better" solely on grounds of epistemic responsibility, as Kawall might be tempted to suggest (see Code 2007, 226). After all, in a structurally unjust society, individuals' capacities for critical self-examination are significantly limited by the social positions they occupy, by their stock of situated social experiences, by the epistemic communities of which they are a part, and by the activities in which they are engaged. One important challenge for individuals is, hence, to broaden their epistemic horizons by working to build trusting, respectful relationships beyond the boundaries of their communities of origin and residence, and by being open to putting into question what they are initially disposed to judge as credible and trustworthy.

In summary, because Kawall uncritically takes for granted the individualization of responsibility for addressing climate change, his account of complacency ends up recommending the path of least resistance to a select few as a normative ideal, holding out false hopes of redemption to members of social groups who stand to be least affected by the adverse effects of climate change, at least for the moment, and who benefit unjustly from the preservation of a resource- and energy-intensive status quo in the short-term, even though their deepest—which is to say, long-term and collective—interests lie elsewhere. Instead of linking processes of character repair to collective efforts aimed at bringing an end to the domination of lands and of peoples and averting climate catastrophe, his account operates ideologically in the service of illegitimate power by presenting changes in the behavior and lifestyles of individuals as suitable responses to climate change, on the assumption that acceptable standards have already been established for individuals. Yet consider the context of climate change: if even those agents with privilege and power are caught up in patterns of behaviour that are contrary to their deepest interests, and if the only solutions that seem workable involve collective action, and sorting out those solutions will take a broadly based collaborative effort, then it must be conceded that suitable responsibilities have not yet been established for individuals, organizations, and institutions *in relation to one another*. More precisely, we cannot get close to an exhaustive understanding of what each agent's interconnected responsibilities might include, and yet we need to figure out how to hold others accountable for their motivational inertia when they make it difficult for us to act in the ways it seems we should. So, if Kawall is right about the conditions under which agents can qualify as complacent, it seems we are forced to concede that government leaders,

corporate executives, and citizens of industrialized nations with privilege and power are off the hook in at least this sense.

True, some performance standards have been established in efforts to expedite binding international agreements (consider the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, for example). Nevertheless, it is far from clear how responsibilities to be assumed at the level of national governments connect up with those to be taken up by agents at other levels of human organization (corporations, churches, social groups, and so on), and many actors lack the skills and training required to see these complex interconnections. In any event, it should not be taken for granted that reducing directly controllable personal sphere emissions is the only or most important responsibility to be assumed by concerned citizens (Cuomo 2011, 708; Section 4.2.1). More generally: it should not be taken for granted that what *any* agent at *any* level is expected to accomplish given established standards, and how well that agent is performing qua individual, ought to be the primary focus of attention. "There is a limit to what individuals can achieve qua individuals when dealing with well-entrenched practices," Sherwin reminds us. "The difficulty is that each type of actor must work collaboratively with others at the same and different levels of human organization if it is to develop sufficient scope to act effectively for positive change" (Sherwin 2012, 31; Section 4.2.2).

4.4. Complacent on Climate Change: An Alternative Account

Pace Kawall, Sherwin's argument for a public ethics suggests that agents at each level of human organization can justifiably hold themselves and others accountable for their motivational inertia even when it is not yet clear what each should be doing in relation to

the others, or what would count as "doing enough" to support ongoing mitigation efforts. After all, in situations where the elaboration and fulfillment of certain responsibilities requires cooperation between and among agents at the same level of human organization, or coordinated action across several different levels, it may be especially difficult for any given agent to discern whether they are "doing the right thing," let alone whether they have "done enough." Nevertheless, success in significantly reducing the harms of climate change will not be attainable should individuals, groups, and organizations each act on their own on the basis of their own limited knowledge, skills, and capacities. So, if government leaders, corporate executives, and citizens of industrialized Western nations can justifiably be charged with "complacency on climate change," it will not be on the basis of received diagnoses. Complacency needs to be reimagined in recognition of the unprecedented nature of the crisis societies are currently facing worldwide.

In light of recent social scientific research, it is becoming increasingly clear that developing public understanding of the complex problem of climate change through popular education will require moving away from overly simplistic, individualist models. As Harriet Bulkeley observes in her review of public policy literature on inaction as the dominant response to climate change, an "information deficit" model assumes that individual citizens respond "rationally" to information on climate change, and generates policy recommendations such as: "the public needs to be given more knowledge about environment issues in order to take action" (Bulkeley 2000, 316). However, on the basis of her research in Newcastle, Australia, Bulkeley underscores the "need to move from a narrow conception of public knowledge and toward negotiation of the complex, fluid and contradictory nature of public understanding of global environmental issues," (329)

which, she claims, ought to be regarded as "located within the inter-subjective contexts of institutions and discourse," not "as stable, coherent, and consistent and to exist within individuals" (316).

Sociologist Kari Norgaard has developed a more sophisticated "social organization of denial" model, which helps shed light on how "the public on a collective level actively resists available information" on climate change (Norgaard 2011, 134). On this model, "What individuals choose to pay attention to or ignore may have psychological elements but must ultimately be understood within the context of both the shaping of interpersonal interaction through social norms and the broader political economic context" (134), which in her case study of Norway includes the extraction, export, and heavy consumption of oil. Norgaard's model focuses on accounting for what the information deficit model evidently cannot: namely, the "behavior of the significant number of people who *do* know about global warming, believe it is happening, and express concern about it" (72), yet *still* do not speak up in public or otherwise take action. Although I could not do justice to her work here, of particular interest is her survey of recent studies which suggest that willingness to contribute to emissions reductions is inversely related to both emissions levels and wealth not only among nations (Sandvik 2008), but within the U.S. (Zahran et al. 2006) as well as within U.S. states (O'Conner et al. 2002), whereas "there are no examples of the reverse relationship, in which higher income is positively correlated with concern for global warming or with support for climate-protection policy" (Norgaard 2011, 77).

Of course, complacency is likely to be but one of many contributing factors here, and I am by no means attempting to speak to or account for data of this sort in its entirety. For example, there may well be a number of people who are simply indifferent to the anticipated impacts of climate change, and to those who stand to be most severely affected, including themselves, other members of their family, and so on. Wealthier people, especially those who are invested in or connected to energy firms, also benefit in many ways, and far more, than poorer people from the maintenance of the status quo, whether or not they are sympathetic to concerns of equity and social justice and also well-informed on the science of climate change. Given that the lives and livelihoods of all are endangered, and even members of socially dominant groups are caught up in patterns of behaviour that are contrary to their deepest interests (which include, at least, the overall long-term interests of the groups to which they belong), I take it that there are several forms of motivational inertia standing in need of philosophical attention, which I propose should be understood from within a general framework of motivational vices. Efforts to account for data of this sort by way of appeals to "self-interested behavior" or "pragmatic rationality" seem to me tremendously unrealistic as general descriptions of human psychological capacities and tendencies, woefully misguided as normative representations of "the human" or "human nature," and, hence, in need of sustained defense. (For interesting observations on the determination of ordinary American citizens to misrepresent themselves as "rational" and "self-interested" for the sake of sustaining morale during especially challenging times, see Eliasoph 1998.)

Norgaard's critical, power-sensitive approach to understanding the denial of climate change in everyday life resonates with my own approach to understanding complacency.

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However, these two forms of motivational inertia are importantly distinct, as I will now go on to show in the remainder of this chapter. According to Norgaard, people who are engaged in "socially organized denial" have some degree of knowledge about a complex problem, believe it is a problem now, even feel and express concern about it—and yet, they do not take it upon themselves to address it in any shape or form. I see no problem with understanding this as a special, collective form of "denial." Nevertheless, complacency in my proposed sense requires that people have also *committed themselves* to addressing the problem in question (here, at least, I agree with Kawall's account). Even though such commitment exists, agents who are complacent in my sense are prevented from responding well by intrapsychic barriers that make it difficult for them to work collaboratively with similarly committed others. Thus, climate deniers, and those who acknowledge the threat but choose to do nothing about it, should not be understood to be complacent, although many seem to exhibit the closely related vices of indifference, apathy, and resignation, if not more actively malicious varieties, such as ruthlessness and cruelty. On the other hand, many of those who have committed themselves to doing something about climate change and are acting on that commitment are complacent nonetheless, though some are more firmly in the grips of this vice than others.

Charges of complacency on climate change are motivated by a shared appreciation that we are living in the midst of a major turning point in the history of the Western world. Growing numbers of people are coming to the realization that radical and effective changes in our social structures and technical infrastructure are urgent and inescapable, and that, for the most part, government and corporate agents in the industrialized West cannot be relied upon to help facilitate these changes on their own initiative. Instead of

thinking of complacency on climate change as a culpable failure to internalize and live up to individualized standards of conduct, complacency in this context should be thought of as an intrapsychic barrier to engaging in the difficult *collective* work of struggling to create alternatives to unsustainable societies.

Now, some might worry that I am tying complacency too closely to the problem of climate change, and *mutatis mutandis* for the problem of mass incarceration discussed at length in Chapter 3. There are two temptations that I think are important to resist here. On the one hand, some might be concerned about the dangers of articulating concepts that are centered too much around one issue, which are in some ways analogous to the dangers of "single-issue voting" in politics. However, I am not so sure that "issues" that can be analytically separated for the purpose of focused discussion are for that reason separate in fact, when they may well be interwoven in a number of significant respects. For example, it may turn out—and there is plenty of good reason to believe—that the structural social, economic, and political processes bound up with the perpetuation of mass incarceration and the current pace of global climate change are closely intertwined, as they are with numerous problems besides, many of which are already well understood. In that case, one would suspect that the specific form of motivational inertia I am describing is intricately connected with—and indeed, one of the products of—those broader processes. Moreover, since climate change is not merely an "issue" among others but an inescapable intensifier of numerous other concerns of social and environmental injustice besides, it is difficult to understand how one could get a handle on what it means to be complacent without taking into account such an enormous threat to the continuation of human and non-human life. On the other hand, I am not convinced that a context-invariant definition of complacency

(a set of necessary and sufficient conditions of the likes proposed by Kawall) is an unquestionable good. It is clearly beyond the scope of the present project to deny that linguistic analysis ever reveals universal or even eternal truths. At any rate, I am more interested in uncovering and making plain the historical contingency of what is, at present, taken by many to be a universal truth, or is at least strongly implied by common usage of language. I am also interested in investigating how what may once have liberatory ideas and ideals have come to play integral roles in the ongoing domination of lands and of peoples. The definition of complacency may well be elusive. The project of seeking to understand and working to remedy complacency is a renewable one, though, and can be taken up under different circumstances and conditions.

With these thoughts in mind, I want to suggest that those who are in the grips of complacency on climate change have some degree of knowledge about the nature and magnitude of the problem, believe it is a problem now, feel and express concern about it, and have also committed themselves to supporting ongoing mitigation efforts (hence, they are not entirely ignorant, indifferent, or unmotivated). Yet regardless of how particular agents are feeling about themselves and their own performance, I propose that they are complacent on climate change insofar as they are caught up in patterns of behaviour that express *settled expectations of self-sufficiency*.

An objection might immediately be raised in the form of a counterexample. Consider complacency with respect to one's health. Pretty clearly, a person who ignores his weight, cholesterol levels, family history, and so on, is complacent with respect to his health, and yet it is also true that his health is a matter of his own choices and behaviors.

His settled expectation that he should take responsibility for his own lifestyle choices and work toward living a healthy lifestyle is entirely appropriate—others rightly expect that he should exert control over his eating, exercise, smoking, and so on. Thus, since it seems that Kawall's account of complacency can help us make sense of a wider and, arguably, more important range of cases—cases that my proposed alternative seem incapable of dealing with—there is reason to think that his account is preferable over mine.

Two points are worth considering in response to this objection. First, there may well be some epistemic and moral goods for which individuals are, uncontestably, solely and wholly responsible, or at least largely or significantly. However, I doubt that health is one of them and I would make similar points about safety as well (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3). Not only do individuals rarely make significant lifestyle choices completely on their own, without the input, assistance, influence, and so on, of others (friends and family members as well as representatives of the media, professionals, and government officials, for example), but the abilities and options required to make good choices are also not always available to all, nor is the ability to significantly control the shape and character of one's own circumstances (see Section 4.2.2). Consider the virtual impossibility of able-bodied adult females finding fresh, affordable, healthy food for themselves in so-called "food deserts" in impoverished urban neighborhoods; or how unreasonable it would be to expect able-bodied adult males who work seventy hours a week at multiple fast food restaurants for less than ten dollars an hour to go home and spend their free time running on a treadmill instead of feeding, bathing, and helping their children to bed. Indeed, internalizing the expectation that one can and should take sole responsibility for one's health-related lifestyle choices may well be unreasonable for

certain persons in certain circumstances. Acting on that expectation to the point of harming oneself and others may reveal one to be complacent with respect to one's health in my proposed sense.

Perhaps, then, it is Kawall who bears the burden of explaining why it is that individualized standards ought to be taken as the universal norm across all contexts and practical domains. It is also worth noting that standards of "good health," as well as the situation of the problem of health at the level of the individual person, seem to be highly variable both historically as well as across contemporary contexts. As a number of scholars have argued through rich historical treatments of the topic, individualized standards of health in the industrialized West are intimately connected to the rise of neoliberal forms of governance during the 1970s, as well as to the profiteering practices of private insurance firms and hospitals, especially in such contexts as the United States where the possibility of single-payer healthcare is still a hotly contested one (on the notion of "healthism" and its coercive implications, see Skrabanek 1994; Rose 1999; Crawford 2006). Second, I take it that the point of raising a counterexample such as this is to undermine the attempted provision of an ahistorical, context-invariant definition of a concept. But that strategy would rest on a misunderstanding of the more modest aims of my project, which are discussed earlier in this section.

Others might object further that Kawall's account of complacency and my proposed alternative are not actually in competition, and that at this point he and I are basically just talking past each other. Perhaps Kawall's account, or some slightly tweaked version of it, can persuasively account for complacency as a *personal* or *individual vice*, whereas my

account can persuasively account for a *social* or *collective vice* of complacency. But the mere fact that I prefer to focus on the latter phenomenon is not in and of itself a good reason to find fault with and reject his account of complacency. By way of response, I readily admit that it would be possible and useful to articulate an account of complacency as some sort of collective vice—indeed, that is precisely the sort of thing that Norgaard has attempted to do when developing her account of "socially organized denial," developing further some of the central ideas from the earlier work of Stanley Cohen (Cohen 2001). Having said this, part of the point of developing an account of complacency through the lens of critical character theory, while also drawing from relational perspectives on the self, agency, and personhood, is to resist the presumed need to choose between an *individual* analysis of complacency on the one hand, and a *collective* analysis on the other. Although I am still very much interested in the intrapsychic characteristics of individuals, the framework I have in mind for understanding motivational vice in general, and complacency in particular, would be better described as a *relational theory of character*.

My approach to theorizing character critically and relationally challenges the well-worn presumption that individual vices can be understood solely in terms of what is going on "inside" individuals, or the allegedly static structures existing therein, without reference to the interpersonal dynamics and broader structurally processes in which individuals are implicated. But the approach I am adopting and developing also resists jumping straightaway to the opposite extreme, which encourages us to regard individuals as merely the passive products of, or as wholly determined by, a confluence of "social forces," social conditioning, communal traditions, and passively inherited power

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relations. Instead, recall that critical character theory "holds together in creative tension a perspective that views the individual through the social and a perspective that views the social through the individual," while also thinking of character as "fluid, dynamic, and contextualized, both bodily and socially, as better understood as processive rather than substantive, as capable of stability without being static" (Dillon 2012 104; 105). To Dillon's helpful description, I would add that the shifting, though sometimes stable relational dynamics between and among agents of various types are what link "the social" and "the individual" together. Thus, it is on the level of relationships, both personal and impersonal in nature, unchosen no less than chosen, that these two perspectives are to be "held in creative tension," rather than reducing one to the terms of the other (as liberalism and communitarianism propose to do, for example—see Downie and Llewellyn 2012, 1-9). Since my proposed alternative to Kawall's account presents complacency as a *relational vice* (because, I contend, human motivational capacities are relationally constituted), and since I have offered reasons to be skeptical of the existence of "individual vices" as Kawall proposes they be understood (as constituted solely by what is "inside" individuals, as static, as the result or a function of the choices of individuals, and so on), it would be more accurate to say that I am attempting to undermine and move beyond his general approach to understanding "character," "virtue," and "vice"—and with it, common usage of the concept of complacency, and the broader social imaginary of which such usage is a part—rather than simply talking past him.

4.4.1. What Are Settled Expectations of Self-Sufficiency?

In the previous section I proposed that, regardless of how particular agents are feeling about themselves and their own performance, they are complacent on climate change insofar as they are caught up in patterns of behaviour that express *settled expectations of self-sufficiency*. By "expectations," I mean expectations in the sense developed by Sue Campbell (Campbell 1999). Drawing upon the earlier work of Bernard Williams, Campbell describes expectations as involving the active thought or contemplation of what the future will be like in terms of a determinate range of possibilities based on our present knowledge (which, in turn, is comprised in large part of our memories and past experiences). These possibilities would include, no doubt, the "human possibilities" to which Babbitt alludes, and which I discussed briefly toward the end of Chapter 3. As Campbell points out,

> That we can have expectations seems fundamental to our knowing how to go on. We could not plan what to do, even in small ways, without beliefs and attitudes about the future, about what effects our actions might have, and also about what we might undergo (Campbell 1999, 222).

Although we are sometimes consciously aware of our expectations, Campbell observes that the activity of expecting need not involve any self-awareness, nor are we typically aware of what it is in particular that we are expecting. Expectations are largely *unselfconscious habits* that operate in the background of our psychic lives, making it possible for us to focus on more deliberative activities in the here and now. Indeed, forming intentions, forging commitments, and making plans would be rather cumbersome affairs were they to require constantly making our expectations explicit to ourselves or to others. For the most part we only come to recognize that we are expecting, and what in particular it is that we expect, when our expectations are frustrated or go unmet.

Seeing as how we are nearly always expecting something to be happening at some point or another, Campbell suggests that expectations play a role in complexly structuring attention from now until then, giving order to our perceptual experience of the world by selecting what we do and do not attend to, and by structuring the relation of these perceptions to one another. For example, after hearing a radio meteorologist report that there is a chance of showers in the afternoon, I might find myself peering out of my office window as the noon hour approaches, expecting to see rain. Instead of focusing on what my supervisor is trying to tell me right at that moment, I keep glaring anxiously at the clouds and wondering whether I should call and cancel plans for a lunchtime picnic with my partner. On Campbell's view, "These activities of *selective attending* are what give expectation its character" (223, my emphasis), and are a powerful way of ordering the world perceptually. Moreover, Campbell claims that our expectations and memories are "reciprocally structuring," for when our expectations go unmet we naturally turn to our memories out of frustration, reviewing how we could have come to expect things to be a certain way in the first place (223). For example, when 2:00pm rolls around and there are still no clouds in the sky, I might be disappointed for having cancelled the picnic too soon and try to recall whom it was that I had heard forecasting afternoon showers on the radio. In turning to our memories we quickly realize that we have developed many of our expectations "in an unsorted and unselfconscious way" through our everyday interactions with others and with the environments we inhabit together, including our places of residence, work, recreation, worship, and so forth (223). We come to expect these places to be as we remember them being before, and for people to be, behave, and interact roughly as they have in the past, or as they promised us they would in the future.

We also develop expectations through what we have explicitly been told or taught to expect, and by following or imitating what it is that others pay attention to in various environments. Although our expectations may be reasonable or unreasonable and may in some cases require response from others, Campbell notes that, "they are often not assessed for reasonability as they are adopted" (225). In many cases our expectations are only assessed retrospectively in the event that they are abruptly made visible to us in going unmet.

Of particular importance for my own purposes, Campbell argues that expectations are the intrapsychic structures that give rise to norms, and that they also explain how norms are internalized in the form of unselfconscious psychic habits. Some of our expectations have normative force because they are explicitly about moral matters, determining what we think ourselves or others ought to be doing in certain situations. For example, I may expect you to treat me with kindness when I ask you for help moving a couch, and I may be disappointed to find you watching television on yours when you said you were too busy to lend me a hand. However, any of the expectations others have of our behaviour, and vice versa, can acquire normative force simply in virtue of being met, regardless of whether they happen to be reasonable or unreasonable. When they are met easily and frequently, expectations "become psychic habits that are unselfconscious and thus protected from critical scrutiny" (216). Campbell proposes that we think of these as *settled expectations*—that is, unselfconscious psychic habits that are sedimented so firmly that they can be "difficult to bring to attention and remember," (232) let alone figure out how they settled into our psyches in the first place. Because expectations play a role in structuring attention and are a way of ordering the world perceptually, Campbell

emphasizes that settled expectations "may come to form the map of the world that I depend on and take as stable, however changeable that world may in fact be" (223). Thus, when settled, expectations can "give rise to creeping dependencies that the world be a certain way and can impose obligations on others that must be coped with," even when they "are unreasonable or fix the world unsuccessfully" (224). Campbell suggests that expectations are more likely to become settled when they are aligned with dominant values and normative perspectives and when they are chronically met, "conditions that typically obtain together" (228). For example, my expectation of being able to afford low-carbon alternatives to driving an SUV and living in a gigantic mansion is likely to be a wholly unselfconscious habit in a society in which I am frequently encouraged to "buy green" by environmentalist groups and government agencies, whereas the economic conditions and social structures that enable me to do so should I decide to are likely to be quite obvious to those who are not presented with similar options.

When I speak of complacency in terms of "settled expectations of self-sufficiency," I should not be understood as suggesting that agents in the grips of complacency have *settled on* particular expectations, as they might settle on a particular belief, value, commitment, or way of living after a lengthy deliberative process. As Robert Goodin points out, settling on something is a "doing" of a relatively active kind—an "inward and ratiocinative process" of choosing, picking, or just plain plumping for one thing rather than another, whereby an agent "sets their mind to rest," marking the end of striving in a particular area of their life (Goodin 2012, 27). According to Goodin, an agent who has settled on something (a belief, a value, or what have you) ought to take full responsibility for the decision they have made. They could also decide to revisit the matter later on their

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own initiative, reopening questions they had previously decided to treat as closed, at least for the time being. By way of contrast, expectations *settle into* our psyches in unsorted and unselfconscious ways as they are met by the people we interact with and the environments we inhabit together in our everyday lives. Although expectations may be reasonable or unreasonable, they are typically not assessed for their reasonableness as they are adopted, nor is their adoption typically an outcome of deliberation. Consider, for example, the difference between economists, politicians, and environmentalists who openly and self-consciously promote the neoliberalization of the global economy and argue that problems of the magnitude and complexity of climate change are best addressed through market-based solutions, and those who simply behave as though they expect as much because they have never given much thought to the matter.

By "expectations of self-sufficiency," I mean expecting that there is something *I* can do to address climate change as an individual. That is, I "succumb to" complacency when I come to have expectations about both what I will be able to *know*, and what I will be able to *do*. In particular, I come to expect that I will be able to fully discern the problem in question, my role in it, and my responsibilities and their limits on my own, or at least through consultation and deliberation with similarly positioned and situated others who share a stock of cultural references, social experiences, and core beliefs. I also come to expect that I will be able to manage the actions that are required of me on my own. For example, in the case of climate change, I might expect that I have or have access to all the information I need to come to understand the problem by myself. There may be a great deal I do not know, but I expect to know as much as I need to from the perspective of determining how I should go about responding. I also expect that I will be able to discern

my role within the problem—perhaps, as a commuter whose carbon footprint urgently needs to be reduced, or as a meat-eater contributing to high-emitting agribusiness. I expect that my responsibilities are ones that I can understand, on the basis of my understanding of the problem—perhaps I have a responsibility to carpool or purchase local produce when possible, or to install better household insulation. Importantly, I expect that whatever I discern my responsibilities to be, they will be *manageable for me as an individual*. Once again, I am not claiming that individuals should not take any of these sorts of steps, or that they are not worth pursuing, for I agree with Cuomo that they are ethically imperative (see Section 4.2.1), But I am claiming that their prioritization over other responsibilities, as manifested in an agent's everyday behavior, is expressive of expectations that have settled into the background of their psychic lives. These are expectations of self-sufficiency in the sense that one comes to expect that the only ways one can act responsibly to address the problem are those one can fully understand and act upon now, as one is, on one's own. As such, I do not so such much as countenance the possibility that I may not yet or ever have the capacity or authority to fully discern the problem, my role within it, or my responsibilities to address it. Nor can I admit of the possibility that what my role or responsibilities turn out to be may not be manageable for me alone. In the particular case of climate change, I "lapse into" complacency by coming to expect that there is something *I* can do to become a "good environmental citizen" by improving my own behaviour and lifestyle. When this expectation is so easily and frequently met by the kinds of people I interact with, and given the resources at my disposal, that it recedes into the background of my conscious awareness and becomes part of the way I expect the world to be, my character can become so thoroughly damaged that

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I am prevented from inquiring into, seeking better understanding of, and responding well to an especially complex problem. Damage of this sort can also be incredibly difficult to remedy. For as Campbell points out, settled expectations frame and limit perception "with an unquestioned normativity," determining what we think ourselves or others ought to be doing in ways that become visible only when frustrated, occasioning emotional responses that can be hostile or otherwise antithetical to change (231; 222-225).

There are some people who fit this description better than others, to be sure. I take it that whether one is complacent with respect to climate change, or any other problem, for that matter, is a matter that admits of degrees along a number of axes of what I have called "self-sufficiency" (epistemic, moral, economic, and so on), and some problems will overlap, or be more closely intertwined than others. Consider, once again, complacency with respect to one's health. On my view, a person may come to have and express through his behavior the settled expectation that he should take responsibility for his own lifestyle choices and work toward living a "healthy lifestyle," while nevertheless relying on other members of his family to buy groceries, to prepare and cook food, to do the laundry, and so on. Although his everyday behavior betrays his expectations of being able to fully discern and deal with the problematics of health in his everyday life on his own, it just so happens that his intimates are doing a great deal of the work required to maintain and promote his health. Yet the fact that he does not actually *succeed* in living up to the full range of expectations implied by his own individualistic self-presentation is not, I think, a good reason to withhold the attribution of complacency, contestable though it may be in certain cases. The important point is that his peculiar way of ordering the world perceptually and normatively is expressed through his behavior in ways that are

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interpretable by others, even when it fails to fit the world successfully and is frustrated repeatedly without being corrected.

Consider another, complementary example of how having and expressing expectations of self-sufficiency admits of degrees. Surely there are a number of people who are humble enough to defer to the specific expertise of climate scientists, rather than, say, upholding Cartesian standards of certainty when considering the current reality and future prospects of ecological catastrophe. There are also many who show dedication to slowing the pace of climate change through their daily efforts to purchase and make use of less carbon-intensive products and technologies, as well as through long-term planning oriented towards reducing their own carbon footprints, not to mention helping to reduce those of their extended families and friends. Unlike the delusional health-seeker discussed above, neither the epistemic nor the moral practices of these humble and dedicated types have been individualized to the point of absurdity. Rather, they are dependent on and in several respects stand to improve relations of trust and accountability not only among kith and kin, but also communities of diverse kinds and levels of expertise. It would be unreasonable to deny that commitment to personal changes of these sorts is some measure of having worked together to remedy complacency, that it does make a meaningful difference, or that it can be a political statement in its own right. However, acknowledging that complacency is a matter of degree entails neither that more work in the same direction is always better, nor that one must be doing the right thing in the right way to have "overcome" complacency. As I suggested in Chapter 3, complacency is constituted by a multidimensional form of normative comfort that one cannot simply work oneself out of all on one's own, or even among one's own. It follows from this

characterization that those in the grips of complacency can afford neither the luxury of going on in the same way, nor of determining what the alternative way shall be.

4.4.2. How Are These Expectations Fostered?

As noted earlier (see Sections 4.2.1 and 4.3.3), many people living in the industrialized West have been taught by government agencies and prominent environmentalist groups, not to mention by scholars working in the field of environmental virtue theory, to expect there to be a standard of "good environmental citizenship" that is achievable by individual citizen-consumers. Indeed, expectations of self-sufficiency settle in as a matter of course in privileged parts of the industrialized West, where the achievement of epistemic and moral autonomy serves as the presumptively natural and prescriptively fostered goal of normal development, especially for white, male, middle and upper class children (Code 2006, Ch.4). It would be strange to suggest that expectations of self-sufficiency are *chosen* by developing agents, as opposed to transferred, absorbed, taught, cultivated, and ultimately sedimented into the psyches of budding youths in circumstances where thinking for yourself and regulating your actions by principles you are ready to own is part and parcel of becoming a valued participant in a settled way of living. As I argued in Chapter 3, complacency with respect to serious social and environmental crises should be thought of as the complex embodiment of epistemic, socio-political, and moral senses of comfort that stem from living within, and in many ways benefitting from, presently instituted arrangements and hierarchies of power.

4.4.3. How Do These Expectations Guide Action?

Under current conditions, settled expectations of self-sufficiency tend to make acting alone on the basis of already established performance standards, or else sitting back and waiting for clear and definitive solutions to emerge, seem like the only courses of action that are possible and attractive to many. When the way people attend to and perceive the world is structured by expectations such as these, my account suggests that they will tend either to not notice opportunities for engaging in more collaborative forms of action, or else to dismiss these out of hand when they are raised as possibilities by others.

For example, I may feel crushed by the realization that shopping for organic produce does more to allay my own guilty conscience and help me *feel* empowered than it does to further serious struggles for social and infrastructural transformation. So crushed, in fact, that when my friends invite me to help organize in support of an improved public transportation in an impoverished area of the city, I insist we focus instead on problems that are "closer to home" (Eliasoph 1998), constrained by stinging feelings of helplessness that depend on what I have come to expect "dealing with a problem" to look like in *this* world. Although I no longer *believe* I am epistemically and morally self-sufficient, I keep going on in the same way, expressing through my behaviour settled expectations to the contrary.

Yet as Sherwin's argument for a public ethics suggests, there are alternatives to these essentially passive, reactionary stances that involve coming to grips with the fact that people are always in relationships with others on the same and different levels of human organization (whether family members, neighbours, colleagues, coworkers, fellow citizens, or more distant peoples with whom we are connected through structural

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economic and political processes spanning the globe), some of whose experiences, core beliefs, and ways of life they may have been taught to devalue and disregard. And as Mills' work on race and the epistemologies of ignorance suggests, it is often precisely for the sake of disregarding and devaluing the lives of others that communities are formed and reproduced on the basis of epistemic insularity. That the dysfunctional cognitive practices required for the preservation of such insularity end up damaging the characters of their practitioners should come as no surprise.

4.4.4. What Would Being "Shaken Out of" Complacency Look Like?

Working through this particular form of motivational inertia seems to require that agents come to expect to be able to engage in collaborative work, to only be able to create alternatives to unsustainable societies through such work and, come what may, to need to work together with others at the same and different levels of human organization. In other words, being "shaken out of" complacency requires coming to prioritize effective collaboration over individual achievement—or better, to see individual achievement as complexly bound up with, rather than in tension with, cooperative and coordinated forms of action.

Campbell's insights on the relationship between social identities, senses of self, and settled expectations strongly suggest that efforts to work through complacency must consider carefully what circumstances tend to foster expectations of self-sufficiency, enforce and sustain them once they have settled in, and resettle them when they are frustrated—in addition, of course, to what circumstances tend to support processes of *un*settling them. If instead we insist on understanding complacency as a motivational vice

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for which individuals are solely and wholly responsible for acquiring and correcting, I am

concerned that we risk addressing the intrapsychic dimensions of social and

infrastructural change in ways that reinforce complacency, while still not understanding

why certain social identities tend to produce such curious cocktails of intense self-focus

and relative lack of political self-awareness.

To develop expectations beyond self-sufficiency, I will need to cultivate expectations that

differently positioned and situated others can have the capacity and authority to discern

the nature of a problem, my roles within it, and my correlative responsibilities to address

them. Further, I will need to cultivate expectations that I will only be able to manage my

roles and responsibilities to address a problem by engaging in collaborative work with

others. Importantly, given Campbell's claims concerning how expectations as fostered

and frustrated in and through our relationships with others—as confirmed or met by the

people and environments I interact with in some cases, and as thwarted or unmet in

others—my possibilities for cultivating an alternate set of expectations are themselves to

a considerable extent contingent on the character and quality of my interactions with

others. Campbell elaborates further a relational view of persons as follows:

> We develop and live our lives as persons within complex networks of
> institutional, personal, professional, interpersonal, and political
> relationships—both chosen and unchosen. We are shaped in and through our
> interactions with others in ways that are ongoing; and we develop cognitive
> and moral capacities and skills, including skills of moral reflection, in
> relational contexts that not only give these capacities and skills specific
> content but also offer methods of evaluation and self-evaluation. We come to
> understand our lives through how others respond to us, and our relational
> histories are significant determiners of the tenor of our responses to others
> (Campbell 2003, 156).

Because the expectations, decisions, and actions of agents of many different types inescapably frame and condition our own in ways both constraining and enabling, it stands to reason that increasing the relational autonomy of all agents who seek to coordinate their actions in response to climate change requires working to build trusting, respectful relationships by engaging in complex communication across differences, rendering ourselves accountable to others, and continually learning, through a cumulative and predictably mistake-filled process, to work collaboratively in ways that make possible more accurate analyses of the structural sources of injustice as well as more creative and compelling visions of alternative economic, social, and political arrangements. So, we (prospective coordinators) need to be asking: How can we support one another through what are often quite difficult processes of coming to grips with how tangled together all agents are in networks of highly interdependent relationships, not to mention how changeable those relations and relationally constituted agents can be? How can we move away from passively accepting prefabricated roles and false "solutions" to the climate crisis and toward collectively reflecting on and becoming accountable for our positions in relation to the economy and to others, working to repair relationships when possible, forge alliances we might not otherwise make, and develop the scope to act effectively for social and infrastructural change by strengthening these multivalent relationships?

What would being "shaken out of" complacency on climate change look like, and why should anybody bother? Those who are collaboratively beginning to shake one another out of this motivational vice are struggling to create alternatives to unsustainable societies, rebuilding what they have known without guarantees of success, and

undergoing political transformations in the process of transforming the institutional contexts of their lives. They do not all come from the same backgrounds or share the same motivations. Informed by common failures, and rightly suspicious that waiting to see what happens is a dangerous way of rationalizing inaction, together they are proactively negotiating visions of sustainable community, food production, education, work, and so on, while implementing a variety of strategies for unraveling the interlocking systems of domination holding unsustainable visions in place.

Indeed, one of the chief reasons many of those who are already engaged on climate change are concerned about complacency is the specific role it plays in the domination of lands and of peoples. As Norgaard reminds us, "Citizens of wealthy nations who fail to respond to the issue of climate change benefit… in economic terms," while "avoiding the emotional and psychological entanglement and identity conflicts that may arise from knowing that one is doing "the wrong thing"" (Norgaard 2011, 72). And yet, even members of socially dominant groups are caught up in patterns of behaviour that are contrary to their deepest interests. That it can be so difficult to unsettle expectations of self-sufficiency when the short-term benefits of going on in the same way are so tangible, and the comforts, so multifarious, must be one of the forms of damage domination inflicts on people and their lives—damage which I suspect goes uncompensated for by the privileges enjoyed here and now. It is also one of the mechanisms through which domination is reproduced, to the extent that those with privilege and power manage to prevent themselves from participating in ongoing efforts to go on differently, stifling cultivation of the courage, humility, vigilance, and love we urgently need to avoid global catastrophe.

5. Conclusion

> In our rapidly changing society we can count on only two things that will never change. What will never change is the will to change and the fear of change. It is the will to change that motivates us to seek help. It is the fear of change that motivates us to resist the very help we seek.
>
> - Harriet Lerner

> Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other.
>
> - Judith Butler

5.1. Introduction: Rereading King's "Letter"

Early on in the spring of 1963, members of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) issued a call for aid to Martin Luther King Jr. and other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In response to the racial injustices engulfing the city of Birmingham, Alabama, together these groups set out to organize the Birmingham Campaign—a coordinated string of marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and other nonviolent direct actions staged strategically over the Easter shopping season. On April 10th, 1963, the city's government obtained a court injunction from state authorities effectively outlawing further demonstrations. Nevertheless, King led a march

through the city's streets two days later on Good Friday, openly violating the terms of the injunction. Under the guidance of Eugene "Bull" Conner, the city's Commissioner of Public Safety, policemen aggressively apprehended King and tossed him into a paddy wagon alongside his close friend and fellow movement leader, Ralph Abernathy. King was promptly placed under solitary confinement upon his arrival at the local jail, where he would remain in custody for several weeks. Meanwhile, the Birmingham Campaign intensified as peaceful black protestors and their allies were met with violent backlashes from white policemen, merchants, and other citizen defenders of segregation.

On April 12th, 1963, the day of King's arrest, eight white Alabama clergymen published a statement in the *Birmingham News* under the title, "A Call for Unity" (Carpenter et al., 1963). The authors spoke out against the demonstrations taking place in the city and appealed to "both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense." Although they acknowledged the existence of racial injustices in Birmingham, noting the "natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized," they firmly denounced the nonviolent direct actions that had been "directed and led in part by outsiders," referring to these activities as "unwise and untimely," even as inciting "hatred and violence." Speaking primarily to citizens of Birmingham, they urged their "own Negro community to withdraw their support from these demonstrations" and advised that efforts to work against racial injustice in the city "can best be accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area, white and Negro, meeting with their knowledge and experience of the local situation." In place of the philosophy and methods of nonviolent direct action, they recommended a "new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems," which is to say a more gradual,

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law-abiding approach that precludes the involvement of "outsiders." The white

clergymen insisted that, "When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed

in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets."

King would soon come across "A Call for Unity" when a copy of the *Birmingham News*

was smuggled into his jail cell by an associate. He famously responded to the statement

in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," (King 1963) which was smuggled back out of jail

on April 16th, 1963 and eventually published in several venues over the following two

months, including *The Christian Century*. Although King presents his letter as a

"vigorous, eloquent reply to criticism," (768) he never did send a copy to the eight white

clergymen to whom he was responding. Only the first five of the letter's thirteen sections

are devoted to answering their objections: King responds in turn to their remarks about

"outside agitators," and then to their characterization of he and other nonviolent resisters

as unreasonably impatient, irresponsible, unwise, unlawful, and extremist. The bulk of

the letter is devoted to the articulation of two "honest confessions" of disappointment,

which, while ostensibly addressed to the white clergymen (767), were clearly meant for a

much wider audience living in the northern as well as southern United States.

In his letter King emphasizes how "gravely disappointed" he has been with "the white

moderate" over the past two years of the freedom struggle, and the "deep

disappointment" he has felt towards the leadership of "the white church" in particular

(770-773). When he speaks of "the white moderate" I take him to be referring to those

white people who were generally in favour of desegregation or who were at least not

willing to defend segregation and to resist efforts to undermine its supporting laws,

preferring, instead, a gradual approach to enacting legal reforms and insisted on abiding by the law in the meantime. At a national level, King was likely referring to President John F. Kennedy and other prominent liberal politicians. White moderates occupied a middle ground between white supremacists and other ardent segregationists on the one hand (a majority group in the south comprised mainly of members of the White Citizens' Council, the Ku Klux Klan, as well as a number of white merchants and unaffiliated citizens), and antiracist white radicals and active supporters of desegregation on the other (a minority group made up largely of small groups women, students, and religious devotees, among others). The distinction between "the white moderate" and "white clergymen" is, however, a blurry one through the text. While King addresses white clergymen throughout, I take it that he is also addressing them, and others, as white moderates. He offers detailed accounts of what he had hoped for from members of each group, recounting how these hopes had repeatedly been "blasted," and linking his acutely felt pains to those endured by blacks over the past three and a half centuries (768). By articulating two "major" confessions of disappointment, King asserts his authority to evaluate the character of his critics and like-minded citizens, turning the tables on white clergymen and moderates and holding them accountable to southern blacks for their ways of relating to active participants in the freedom movement. "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate," he writes. "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection" (770).

Readers who are familiar with King's "Letter" and his posthumously published essay, "A Testament of Hope" (King 1969), will appreciate the extent to which his thinking evolved over the years in response to changing conditions of struggle. Complacency is among the many recurring, developing themes in his written work. King was not one to shy away from calling out the "do-nothingism" of complacent southern blacks during the early 1960s (King 1963, 771). He also named the "complacent majority" in the United States who had "allowed a multitude of social evils to accumulate" by the late 1960s, and were forced to confront the eruption of multiple urban rebellions across the country (King 1969, 175). The charges of complacency King leveled upon particular groups, both black and white, are perhaps as powerful and challenging in contemporary contexts as they were in the contexts that moved he and so many others to engage in collective action. However, some of his charges were far subtler and less direct than others. I worry that if contemporary readers focus on what he explicitly calls "complacency" in his "Letter," they will risk missing a deeper sense that is implicit in the way he confronts white clergymen and moderates throughout. Arguably, this deeper sense of complacency is more relevant to ongoing efforts aimed at working against racial and class-based oppression and for the creation of the beloved community that King and so many others have longed for.

In this final chapter I will read King's confessions of deep disappointment as incisive responses to the unbearable complacency of white clergymen and moderates—responses that stop short of actually calling out members of these groups as "complacent," but that aim, nevertheless, to start "shaking them out of" their motivational inertia. Although King explicitly bemoans "shallow understanding," finds fault with "lukewarm acceptance,"

and laments the fact that many white sympathizers are "more cautious than courageous," I will argue that these assessments ought to be read as targeting symptoms of the underlying relational syndrome he is setting out to diagnose. In so doing I take myself to be appealing to a continually evolving tradition of civic and practical wisdom that King inherited and helped carry forward, and that undergirds the authority of his diagnoses of character damage under oppressive circumstances. I am also relying on King's skills as a diagnostician as way of building a case for what is involved in processes of remedying complacency—a task to which I will turn in the final section of this chapter. To anticipate, given that what it means to be complacent with respect to complex social and ecological problems is to be caught up in patterns of behavior that express settled expectations of self-sufficiency, I will argue that remedying this form of motivational inertia involves working together to shift relational dynamics in ways that unsettle these expectations and cultivate alternative modes of expecting.

King evidently recognized the need to unearth and make visible social tensions to facilitate needed growth along multiple, interrelated dimensions: epistemic, moral, and sociopolitical. As he put it, bringing tension-packed situations to the surface would help members of certain groups "rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood [*sic*]" when they would not otherwise have given up their "unjust posture" on their own initiative (King 1963, 768). In a tone of mock politeness laced with fierce indignation, he pushed the audience of his "Letter" to recognize how profoundly disappointing they are, and to acknowledge that they do not— indeed, *could not*—understand what it is like to be so deeply disappointed as a member of a racially and class-oppressed group. By giving expression to his sorely pained feelings,

King affirmed being in relation with the very white clergymen and moderates with whom he was so bewildered, reminding would-be supporters of the black freedom movement that, "There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love" (772). He also seemed to appreciate that an affirmation of this sort would open up possibilities for shifting relational dynamics, including those modes of relating that contribute to fostering and sustaining complacency. Thus, as a way of illustrating what is involved in processes of remedying complacency I will turn to the work of white, male, feminist and anti-racist organizer Chris Crass, whom I understand to be among those who have taken up King's loving challenges, incorporating them into his own strategies for building multiracial, intergenerational movements for collective liberation.

It is worth noting from the outset, however, that this chapter does not offer any recipes for remedying complacency, nor does it purport to offer any universal or timeless truths on the subject. I am turning to King and Crass not as flawless or exemplary individuals, and certainly not because I take them to be infallible, but precisely because I recognize them as participants in a much broader tradition of collective thought and practice that openly acknowledges the fallibility and continual openness to revision of its own methods. Part of what I find attractive about Crass's work is the way he self-consciously seeks to learn lessons from the various failures and successes of past movements, including the civil rights movement of the 1960s, to help avoid repeating past mistakes as far as possible while also enabling recognition of genuinely new mistakes as opening possibilities for growth. As the account of complacency I have been developing is offered in that spirit, so too are the remarks to come on the complex subject of character repair.

I proceed as follows. In Section 5.2, I offer an overview of the problems King and others were setting out to address in Birmingham, endeavouring to account for how he could have been so gravely disappointed with white clergymen and moderates. I examine the four sources of disappointment described in his "Letter" before going on to argue that the object of his complex disappointment is best understood as complacency in the sense described in Chapters 3 and 4. In Section 5.3, I turn to the task of unpacking the complacency of the white church and white moderates more generally, focusing on the many cognitive and practical tasks they seem to expect to be capable of working through on their own, and contrasting their expectations with those expressed through the work of King and other civil rights leaders and activists. Finally, in Section 5.4, I build a case for what is involved in processes of remedying complacency by charting connections between the diagnostic work of King and the organizing work of Crass. I discuss the relationships between repairing character damage and working toward broader structural change, exploring some of the ways in which personal transformation is bound up with building culture and community for sustainable, long-term engagement.

5.2. What Problem Was King Setting Out To Address?

In order to understand how King could have been so deeply disappointed with white clergymen and moderates, it is important to appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the problems that he and other members of the SCLC and AMCHR had come together to address. As he notes early on in his "Letter,"

> Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is widely known. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more

unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any
other city in the nation (767).

Although these "hard, brutal facts" would have been common knowledge to many, local

leaders in commerce and government consistently refused to negotiate in good faith with

civil rights leaders and activists, and when they did make promises to enact token reforms

(removing "whites only" signs from storefront windows, for example), those promises

were predictably broken soon thereafter. By insisting that the cause of desegregation

should be "properly" pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, while

dismissing black leaders as extremists and urging local blacks to withdraw their support

from demonstrations, the white clergymen were recommending strategies that had proven

woefully ineffective time and again. Indeed, it was the sheer hopelessness of these very

strategies that had led AMCHR's founder, Baptist minister Fred Shuttlesworth, to issue a

call for aid from abroad in the first place. So, by dismissing as "outside agitators" those

whom Shuttlesworth had deliberately turned to for support, the white clergymen were

calling his judgment into question while simultaneously offering him advice on how to

proceed. Thus, King is quite right to point out that their statement indicates a failure to

grapple with the underlying causes of the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham,

and to express concern for the unjust and inhumane circumstances that had brought these

demonstrations about. As he puts it, the words of the white clergymen betrayed "the

superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with

underlying causes" (767; see Chapter 2, Section 2.4).

By way of contrast, King recognized that "the city's white power structure left the Negro

community with no alternative" but to prepare for engaging in nonviolent resistance

(767). Unlike the white clergymen, their assessment of the options as reasonable or unreasonable was not based on the presumption of a static, unalterable set, nor did they take for granted a simplistic "either-negotiate-or-demonstrate" dichotomy. After all, King and other civil rights leaders and activists were well aware that the white power structure in Birmingham was not a monolithic entity. Rather, it was constituted by a diverse array of agents operating on a number of different levels of organization (merchants, police, government officials, nurses, bankers, priests, and so on), who had various roles and responsibilities as well as varying values, interests, commitments, capabilities, and skills. Although some were died-in-the-wool white supremacists who were prepared to take significant risks to defend *de jure* segregation, others were shrewd businessmen first and foremost, too pragmatic to bother taking a stand behind laws and practices that only worked for them under certain conditions. Then there were those whites who privately sympathized with the black freedom movement but ended up passively supporting the segregationist status quo out of fear of social ostracization, among other things. Whether active or passive opponents of desegregation, "neutral" bystanders, cautious sympathizers, or more active allies and supporters of the freedom movement, the decisions and actions of each type of agent helped to determine the options available to agents of other types. So, which options would seem reasonable or attractive to members of which groups were synchronically as well as diachronically variable. Although attempting to negotiate with white merchants and officials had proven to be an ineffective strategy hitherto, civil rights leaders and activists estimated that staging demonstrations would help to "create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation" (768). By peacefully confronting the violent backlashes of white

supremacists and other stubborn segregationists, they hoped to make it less attractive for whites to openly defend segregation, not to mention less unthinkable to throw their support behind ongoing struggles for desegregation. Such a visible shift in allegiances would help make engaging in genuine dialogue seem like a reasonable and attractive option for whites who had for too long "been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue" (768).

Thus, members of the SCLC and AMCHR recognized the need to work collaboratively across racial, ethnic, religious, and class-based divisions as a way of expediting the process of bringing an end to segregation and prefiguring relations among a desegregated citizenry. Yet the white people whom they expected to be among the most sympathetic to these aims were obstructing progress by reinstituting dynamics of racial and class-based privilege and power, and by failing to work collaboratively with participants in the freedom movement. These, I contend, are the main sources of King's "grave disappointment." It is tempting to read his letter primarily as a contribution to an ongoing debate on strategy and tactics, as an example of rhetorical excellence, as a call for unity in support of the philosophy and methods of nonviolent resistance, or as some combination of the above. However, on my proposed reading among the main issues at stake are the failures of "well-meaning" whites, first, to actually relate well to those at the center of the freedom struggle, as well as to those on behalf of whom they were struggling; second, to recognize the epistemic agency and authority of black leaders and activists; and third, to render themselves accountable to black freedom fighters by taking on secondary, supporting roles in the growing movement. King was disappointed by a ubiquitous failure on the part of whites to participate in shifting race- and class-based

relational dynamics, to show respect for others and work toward building more trusting

relationships, and to learn how to share power and responsibility horizontally, prefiguring

the kind of non-dominative community he and many others aspired to create.

Of course, *King was also pissed off as all hell*. Had he not been so pragmatically and

relationally oriented in his thinking and practice, he may well have preferred to go it

alone with fellow black activists against white-dominated economic, legal, and political

institutions. At church he referred to white moderates as "utterly pitiful" and seemed to

want little to do with them. With these thoughts in mind, his letter can plausibly be read

as a contribution to the genre of political, nonlegal testimony known as *testimonio*, which

is "concerned with harms done to those who belong to diminished social categories," and

more broadly, "with oppression, poverty, abuse, subalternity, and so on" (Campbell 2003;

see also Beverly 1992). Writing on his own behalf in solitary confinement, King is also

invoking the authority to articulate the nature of oppressive harms as experienced

collectively by southern blacks, even if certain harms were experienced differently, more

acutely, or only by the poor, women, children, the elderly, and disabled. In his letter he is

confronted with the especially difficult task of clarifying and making urgent the structural

sources of racial oppression in Birmingham, and the complicity of well-meaning whites

in their perpetuation, while simultaneously inviting the very same people he is

challenging to work collaboratively toward instituting alternative arrangements.

5.2.1. Grave Disappointment, Lingering Hope

Why was King so gravely disappointed with "the white moderate"? King mentions four

sources of disappointment, each of which he describes as rooted in antecedent hopes. In

this section I will enumerate these four sources of disappointments before going on to argue that the object of his complex disappointment is best understood as complacency in the sense described in Chapters 3 and 4. To anticipate, my contention will be that although King's disappointments may seem to target straightforward epistemic failures for which individual whites are solely and wholly responsible (e.g., shallow understanding, arrogance, and a culpable reluctance to offer moral deference to others), the true target of his disappointment is the underlying relational syndrome to which these other problems can be traced as predictable symptoms. What is more, King seems to have recognized that the most lasting and effective remedies for these symptoms would involve shifting certain relational dynamics, creating openings for the reorganization of the behavior of white moderates in tandem with alternate modes of expecting.

Allow me to begin by enumerating the four sources of King's "grave disappointment." First of all, King had hoped white moderates would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that "when they fail in this purpose they block social progress." Yet he was disappointed to find that white moderates are "more devoted to "order" than to justice," as evidenced by the failure of many white sympathizers to observe the distinction between just and unjust laws, and by their unwillingness to allow for unjust laws to be broken, even when these laws are broken openly, and lovingly, with a view to bringing segregation to an end (770).

Second, King had hoped white moderates would welcome social tension as disrupting "an obnoxious negative peace" under the shadow of which unjust laws had been tolerated by far too many for far too long. He expected some whites to be capable of recognizing that

tension-packed transitional phases are sometimes necessary to foster growth along multiple, interrelated dimensions of personal and social life, insofar as viscerally felt tensions draw attention to deeply entrenched patterns of racist behavior that have too easily been ignored, while also spurring negotiations that have been too long delayed. He and others contended that unearthing and making visible social tensions would help push a society towards "a substantive, positive peace," wherein mutual recognition, respect, and accountability are finally made possible across multiple differences, and negotiations can be conducted in good faith at long last. Yet he was disappointed to discover that white moderates "prefer a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice," as evidenced by the white clergymen's collective abhorrence of, and recoil from, the racial and class-based tensions unearthed in the midst of nonviolent demonstrations (770).

Third, under the circumstances King had hoped white moderates would see the need for "creative extremists," and agree, at least for the most part, with the fittingness of the philosophy and methods of nonviolent direct action. Yet he was disappointed to find his fellow clergymen portraying his nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist, referring to peaceful marches, sit-ins, and boycotts as "extreme measures," even as inciting "hatred and violence." While King writes that he is willing to embrace the "extremist" label so long as he is recognized as "an extremist for love and justice," he is also quick to point out that he stands "in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community." On the one hand, there is a force of complacency made up of,

> Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so completely
> drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have
> adjusted to segregation, and of a few middle class Negroes who, because of

a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have unconsciously become insensitive to the problems of the masses (770).

Unlike members of this class-diverse group, King says that he "cannot sit idly by" while injustice exists in the city of Birmingham—or "anywhere," for that matter (767). On the other hand, there is a force of bitterness and hatred that "comes perilously close to advocating violence," and is made up of "people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible "devil,"" particularly Elijah Muhammad and other members of the Nation of Islam. King presents himself as standing in between these two opposing forces, saying that "we need emulate neither the "do-nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred of the black nationalist," for "there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest." Rather than counseling blacks to rid themselves of their discontent, he acknowledges their anger as healthy and normal and recommends that it be "channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action" (771).

Fourth and finally, King had hoped white moderates would "reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom," and that they would instead "use time creatively in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right." Yet he was disappointed to discover that white moderates live "by a mythical concept of time," according to which time inevitably heals all wounds, all by itself, regardless of how individuals and communities relate to one another and what they do in the interim. By constantly advising blacks to wait for a "more convenient season," the white clergymen of Birmingham reveal their paternalistic belief that they "can set the timetable for another man's freedom" (770), and that they are far from comprehending the legitimate and

unavoidable impatience of blacks (769). "For years now I have heard the word "Wait!"

writes King. "It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait!"

has almost always meant "Never"" (768).

Why was King so deeply disappointed with the white church and its leadership? As a

leader of the Montgomery bus boycott and a minister of the gospel himself, King had

expected to be supported by ordinary members of the white church, and for white

ministers, priests, and rabbis to be among the strongest allies of the freedom movement.

Yet his dreams were abruptly shattered when many leaders of the white church turned out

to be "outright opponents" of the movement, while others "have been more cautious than

courageous," remaining "silent and secure behind stained-glass windows."

Notwithstanding his shattered dreams, King arrived in Birmingham with similar

expectations of that city's clergy—only to be met with disappointment yet again. "In the

midst of blatant injustices inflicted on the Negro I have watched white churchmen stand

on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities," he writes.

"We are moving toward the close of the 20th century with a religious community largely

adjusted to the status quo—a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a

headlight leading men to higher levels of justice" (772). Nevertheless, King affirms being

in relation with the church and its leadership through the way he expresses the severity of

his disappointment with these groups. "In deep disappointment I have wept over the

laxity of the church," he writes. "But be assured that my tears have been tears of love.

There can be no disappointment where there is not deep love." Thus, King distinguishes

himself from the young people he wrote of meeting every day, "whose disappointment

with the church has turned into outright disgust" (772), and who have given up on white

people and their country, turning instead to the political frameworks of black nationalism and to the prospects of violent revolution.

Were King's expectations of white moderates and clergymen sincere—and if so, were they also realistic? Perhaps it would be best to respond to a speculative question of this sort by focusing on what he actually says. On the one hand, King acknowledges that few white people can "understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race," and even fewer "have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action" (771). He also flirts with the idea that organized religion might be "too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world," noting the church's "silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are" (772). Yet on the other hand, King expresses thanks for what some of his white brothers and sisters had managed to do and become in and through processes of building relationships with black freedom fighters, which suggests that his expectations of white moderates were by no means unfounded. He also thanks God for what some of the "noble souls" of organized religion had been able to accomplish, indicating what human possibilities remain open to others who still cling tightly to, or who are at least normatively comfortable with, the segregationist status quo. Whether religious or not, some white people had managed to grasp the significance of the social revolution taking place in multiple southern cities, committed themselves to supporting participants in that revolution, and participated actively in working towards its goals under the mentorship and guidance of black leaders and activists. Some of them had left the secure confines of their own social circles, communities, and congregations, embracing nonconformity with the segregationist status quo, joining in marches, rallies, and other direct actions, writing

about the struggles of numerous blacks for freedom, and accepting the moral, economic, and political risks associated with all of the above. From King's perspective, members of these groups had "carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment" (773). By serving as examples of admirable, relationally constituted character, they also helped lend credence to his disappointment with those whites who were still dismissing proponents of nonviolent direct action out of hand and refusing to support their efforts to bring an end to segregation.

5.2.2. Complacency as Object of Disappointment

Recall that complacency in my proposed sense is constituted by a multidimensional form of normative comfort, which is made manifest when agents are caught up in patterns of behavior that express settled expectations of self-sufficiency. I will now go on to argue that the object of King's complex disappointment is complacency understood as such, as exhibited by white clergymen and moderates. In order to build a case for this claim, in this section I will read King's "Letter" for clues to his interpretations of the behavior of these groups and his diagnosis of the underlying source of his disappointment. Doing so will involve untangling the various expectations that are expressed through the behavior of white clergymen and moderates, which signal their unselfconscious adherence to, and comfort with, several types of interrelated norms: epistemic, sociopolitical, and moral.

One type of expectation that can be untangled from the rest is of an *epistemic* variety. King seems to recognize the expression of expectations of this type in the way the white clergymen take the standpoint of their own epistemic community for granted, unwittingly making manifest their own epistemic comfort. Evidently, the clergymen do not

understand the sense of urgency communicated to them by members of the black community in Birmingham, rendering them incapable of sympathizing appropriately with the impatience of many blacks—a form of impatience which they describe as "natural," and which King *re*describes as "legitimate and unavoidable" (769). Moreover, the clergymen do not seem to appreciate, or even so much as recognize, the incredibly frustrating experiences blacks have had during and in the wake of negotiations with local leaders and legal authorities. Echoing Frederick Douglas' contention that, "Power concedes nothing without a demand" (Douglas 1857, vi), King emphasizes that,

> We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well-timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation (768).

Here he is insisting both that engaging collectively in nonviolent direct action is *the reasonable thing for blacks to do*, which white sympathizers would not understand because they have not had to deal with the white power structure in the ways blacks have, and that *the time to do it is now,* recognizing that whites would not share this sense of urgency because they have not suffered the harms of everyday racism and racial oppression in segregated cities. Nevertheless, the white clergymen behave as though they are in a position to dictate strategy for and set the pace of desegregation all on their own, without so much as consulting with civil rights leaders and activists. By telling local blacks what to do and when to do it, they are expressing expectations of epistemic self-sufficiency that contribute to reinforcing existing relations of power and epistemic authority, rather than working against and moving beyond them.

Another type of expectation that can be untangled from the rest is of a *sociopolitical*

variety. In the first of his four disappointments, King is disappointed that white moderates

showed themselves to be more devoted to order than to justice. But for blacks living in

Birmingham, *"order" means continuing to endure injustice*, for the laws of the city, of

the state, and of the United States writ large had been unjustly devised, enacted, and

applied under circumstances and conditions dominated by whites. It makes sense that the

white clergymen would expect order to be conducive to some of their own goals and

those of other members of their segregated white community, for the status quo is

tolerable and liveable *for them*—that is, they are normatively *comfortable* with things as

they are, even if not all are normatively *happy* (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2). As King

writes, "We are moving towards the close of the 20th century with the religious

community largely adjusted to the status quo" (55). Moreover, "Far from being disturbed

by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled

by the church's silent—and even vocal—sanction of things as they are" (772).

Here King is underscoring that members of the white church have grown accustomed to

the realities of racial oppression in Birmingham and remain largely, if not entirely,

unharmed. As he points out, the clergymen are "writing from a comfortable desk," quite

unlike the "narrow jail cell" from which he is writing his reply (773)—a symbol of the

starkly contrasting living conditions of whites and blacks more generally. Their shared

perspective on the situation has been shaped by the fact that they do not find the

segregationist status quo *intolerable* or *unlivable*—indeed, they seem to find it so livable

as to be worth preserving indefinitely at the expense of blacks both locally and nationally.

Rather than going to work on transforming the laws and mores of American society, the

white clergymen are simply taking the status quo for granted in spite of their open

acknowledgement of the existence of racial injustice. Moreover, they seem unaware of

the extent to which their own passive acceptance is expressed behaviorally and through

their ways of relating to those who are most severely harmed.

In the second of his four disappointments, King is disappointed to find white

sympathizers recoiling from tension-packed social situations. Recall that the white

clergymen insist that it would be better to press a cause in the courts and to negotiate with

the local authorities, rather than taking to the streets. But of course, they do not have the

experience of negotiating with merchants and government official who treat them

disrespectfully and contemptuously, so their presumption that "all tensions are bad" is

rooted in a shallow understanding of the experience of blacks engaged in struggle and of

the options available to them. They are too trusting of their own readiness to expect

negotiations to be promising, because they would likely have reason, based on their own

past experiences, to expect state representatives and local authorities to negotiate in good

faith *with them*. Simply put, they expect their own stock of social experiences to be and

remain the norm, rather than recognizing these experiences as exceptional and based on

white-skin and class privilege. Because of this, they do not so much as entertain the

possibility that the perspective they share in common might be in some ways

unrepresentative or limited, if not outright distorted by the very injustices they

acknowledge exist.

Yet another type of expectation that can be untangled from the rest is of a *moral* variety.

Recall that in the third of his four disappointments, King challenges efforts to position he

and other nonviolent resisters as "extremists." The conversation is taking place between those whites who see themselves as moderate on the one hand, and King, who sees himself as a moderate black, on the other. When presented with the choice of becoming either a nonviolent resister of segregation or a more militant and violent one, King chose the path of nonviolent direct action—denying, I should add, that this path was not for the militant. How could the white clergymen position King as an extremist? Perhaps because they implicitly regard their own position in favor of localized negotiations as moderate, whereas King and local blacks see that approach as tantamount to doing nothing. King emphasizes that to engage in anything less than nonviolent resistance would be a hopeless approach for blacks that stands to further diminish already damaged senses of self-respect. Crucially, King is saying that the path of nonviolent direct action is the only way he has found to preserve a sense of self-respect and to still have faith in the United States as a collective experiment, while not completely cutting off relationships with white sympathizers. As he puts it, "The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of justice or for the extension of justice?" (771). By way of contrast, none of the options for struggling against segregation for whites involve acquiescing to intolerable or unlivable oppressive harms. So, in that sense, the white clergymen have far more freedom to choose how they will align themselves ethically and politically, and with whom they will be aligned. They elected to position themselves as moderate, suggesting to others that they have hit upon the mean by steering clear of alternative stances of deficiency and excess. And, of course, they *do* represent a moderate position in a way, *but only in comparison to other white people*. From the perspectives of

whites living in Birmingham, the clergymen are taking a stand between the deficiencies of the ardent segregationist majority and the excesses of the rapid desegregationist minority, finding fault with both the unjust posturing of the former and with the latter's readiness to transgress certain laws. What they stand for instead is a gradual, orderly process of desegregation. The crux of this, then, is that the white clergymen unselfconsciously take for granted a white frame of reference on the spectrum of deficiency and excess, regarding their own "moderate" position as that in relation to which there are extremes, while failing to countenance the perspectives and frames of reference of those whose options are far more limited. It is not just that the white clergymen do not recognize the possibility that there could be different and more relevant positions against which to measure and evaluate extremes. In addition, *they expect their own position to be and remain the central one*, not only in relation to which *they* will go on to act, but also as an anchoring point for what they expect of *others*, including local blacks. This epitomizes their expectations of self-sufficiency as a community of epistemic, moral, and political agents. By way of contrast, King points out that white clergymen and moderates have effectively positioned themselves on the sidelines relative to the center of the ongoing freedom struggle.

Fourth and finally, recall that King is disappointed by the white clergymen's repeated attempts to paternalistically offer advise to local blacks, encouraging blacks to stick to their preferred schedule. This connects to the previous point: the white clergymen expect their own gradual, orderly approach to desegregation to be the exemplification of moderation. They do not recognize the possibility of different frames of reference for timing and for senses of the right moments to act, nor do they recognize those frames of

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reference as positioned at the center, relative to which their own preferred pace is extremely—indeed, *unreasonably*—slow. This exemplifies complacency in the sense that white moderates expect their shared understanding of *patience* to be central and go on to evaluate the characters of others as unreasonably impatient on that basis. Because they behave as though they are the sole relevant measures of various structures or traits of character, they also seem to expect to be invulnerable to the evaluations of others.

As King stresses, white clergymen, along with white southerners more generally, are still "bogged down by a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue." Here he articulates almost perfectly what it is to be caught up in patterns of behaviour that express settled expectations of self-sufficiency, for he is highlighting the fact there is not any genuine conversation, much less negotiation going on among the people who ostensibly share similar moral and political aims. The clergymen are not even making an effort to understand where blacks are coming from, how they are analyzing their own economic, social, and political situation, and what strategies they are adopting to address the situation in which they find themselves. The clergymen do not so much as recognize the authority of black leaders to make decisions about what to do and when for themselves, so they certainly do not expect blacks to be equal partners in dialogue. The "monologue" of which King writes is instantiated as a closed circuit of epistemic authority among members of the white community and is a clear example of how the self-sufficiency of settled expectations can be manifested at the level of groups. Importantly, it is not simply that individual white clergymen expect to be capable of reasoning independently, for they are deliberating collectively and in dialogue *with one another*. The problem here is that their collective "self" is too exclusive, and such exclusivity is rooted in shared epistemic

practices that are predicated on and also serve to reinforce shared expectations. Because the clergymen are only in conversation with one another and with other whites whose epistemic agency and authority they recognize, they are hardly able to hear calls for aid from blacks at all—and, more significantly still, *they relate to blacks in ways that show they do not expect to be answerable to those calls*. As King points out, "Segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority" (769). The clergymen are not relating to blacks as experiencing subjects of suffering, evaluation, and judgment. Instead, they are relating to blacks as children who need to be protected, taught, and advised, unwilling to surrender any of their epistemic and moral authority, or even to acknowledge the agency and authority of others.

I will return to the idea that it is important to take the agency and leadership of the oppressed as central in Section 5.4. When people of color take the lead in struggles against systems of domination and oppression that affect them most severely, this serves to prefigure some of the main goals of desegregation—for as King says, the means of struggle must be made consistent with the ends (773). Given that a truly desegregated society would be a society in which power and responsibility are negotiated and shared horizontally, King recognizes that working toward such a society should not reinscribe the paternalistic relations of a segregated one, with their attendant dynamics of power *over*, as opposed to power *with* others. He also recognizes that processes of undoing paternalistic relational dynamics involve judicious overturnings of well-worn behavioral patterns, with a view to learning how to share the roles and responsibilities involved in both the taking and giving of leadership.

5.3. Unpacking the Complacency of "The White Moderate"

As I argued in Chapter 4, agents show themselves to be complacent when they express through their behavior settled expectations of being able to fully discern a problem, their role within it, their responsibilities for addressing it, and the limits of those responsibilities on their own (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4). Thus, those who are in the grips of complacency predictably end up failing to work collaboratively with others to analyze the problem at issue, to discern their role within it, and to sort out their responsibilities for addressing it *in relation to the responsibilities of others*. In the present chapter I have been offering a reading of King's "Letter" as an incisive expression of deep disappointment in response to failures of each of these kinds. As I have already begun to untangle the shared expectations undergirding each of these specific failures, in the following three sections I will now turn to the task of unpacking these failures in detail, further bolstering the case in favor of my proposed reading of King.

5.3.1. Expecting to Discern a Problem of One's Own

One way in which the white clergymen express the expectation that they will be able to fully discern a problem on their own is when they insist that only those with experience of the local situation should be involved in addressing it—meaning, in this case, white and black citizens of Birmingham. Here they are saying that unless you live in this city, you are not able to discern the problems confronting its racially segregated communities; and if you do live there, then you are able. Moreover, the clergymen behave as though, simply by virtue of living in Birmingham, *they* share experiences of the problems associated with racial segregation sufficient to fully understand those problems, although

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they clearly have not endured the painful experience of confronting and struggling to address them. In contrast to the clergymen, King understands many of these problems by virtue of directly experiencing oppressive harms, struggling with others who have different knowledge and skills based on their rootedness in a particular locale, and being able—indeed, pressed by the terms and conditions of struggle—to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others, whether opponents, prospective allies and supporters, or active participants.

First, King's understanding of the problems in Birmingham stems in part from his experience of everyday racism and other oppressive harms. The following passage from his letter is worth quoting at length:

> Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait (768-769).

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Not only does King highlight extensive knowledge of the *facts* of the oppressive harms of segregation, but also knowledge acquired through the experience of being together with and relating to others while enduring and resisting those harms, describing and explaining them to others, and struggling to protect the most vulnerable in his midst, including his own children. Toward the end of the passage, King draws attention to how oppressive harms are experienced emotionally, suffered deeply in the sinews of his body and the fibers of his bones, torturously molding the very fundaments of his sense of self. Significantly, King is underlining the fact that white clergymen and moderates will not *ever* so much as come close to being forced to become so painfully uncomfortable in the world. The only way they will be able to understand why blacks find it so difficult to endure a gradual process of desegregation is by engaging in genuine dialogue with those who directly experience the harms bound up with such an approach, listening to them actively and openly, and coming to recognize the authority of their first-hand accounts (on the kind of "moral deference" demanded here, see Thomas 1992/1993).

Second, King came to understand the problems Birmingham locals were dealing with by working together with them, on the understanding that he would be sharing his own knowledge, strategies, and skills, as they would be sharing theirs with him in return. He is trusting enough of the others with whom he is engaged in struggle to put his body on the line by their side. Meanwhile, "In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro," he writes that he has "watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities" (772). Notice that he draws a contrast here between standing on the sidelines and actually engaging with and alongside others in

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the freedom struggle, and indeed playing a leading role from the center. Because the white clergymen's assessment of the economic, social, and political situation in Birmingham is *not* rooted in engaging that situation responsibly with relevant caring and sensitivity, their experiences and core beliefs, acquired as they have been from the sidelines, are not adequate to understanding the problems at issue.

Third, for King, part of what it means to understand the relevant problems is to engage with the perspectives of those who are implicated in their production and maintenance. Whereas the clergymen make very little effort to open themselves to the perspectives of local blacks, for King, grappling effectively with the problems at issue necessarily involves reaching out towards the perspectives of the white clergymen. We find him putting forth such efforts throughout—his entire letter highlights their shared stock of cultural references (take, for example, his references to Biblical figures), evoking a shared Christian ethos. He attempts to figure out where the clergymen are coming from and makes an effort to highlight how he shares at least some of their experiential background—noting, for example that he is "in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of preachers" (772).

Part of what King demonstrates here is that one can know many things about the local social situation at the level of explicit, propositional knowledge, and still not understand that situation because *one is not engaged with it in the right sorts of ways*—which is to say, not expecting to need to listen to and learn from the people who are most affected by oppressive harms, let alone those who have experimented with different ways of analyzing and dealing with the problems at issue (cf. Babbitt 2009). In other words, the

clergymen take themselves to be authorities on the local situation, when in a relational and practical sense they are more removed from the situation than King, the so-called "outside agitator." They have not "suffered unduly from the disease of segregation," felt its "stinging darts," engaged in struggle alongside others against segregation, or made an effort to listen to those who are centrally involved. Nevertheless, they expect to be capable of inquiring into and understanding all of the problems on their own, revealing themselves to be in the grips of complacency.

5.3.2. Expecting to Discern One's Role on One's Own

The white clergymen also express expectations that they will be able to fully discern their roles in addressing the problems in Birmingham on their own. They are unilaterally deciding who should be involved in responding to the injustices of segregation, positioning themselves all the while as leaders of efforts to desegregate. Thus, they expect to be in a position to sort out how to address the problem amongst themselves, without any substantive input from local or visiting blacks. Recall that in the white clergymen's statement, they are speaking to everyone in Birmingham, acting partly as mediators between segregationists and desegregationists. They advise citizens to abide by existing laws and "common sense" and to hold negotiations among local leaders, while advising local blacks to withdraw their support from ongoing demonstrations. Yet they seem to lack reflexive awareness of their own social location: even if they do share the goal of desegregation and are widely regarded as moral and spiritual authorities in the city, they are not at the center of the ongoing struggle and yet to expect to be recognized

as such regardless. Not only is their understanding of the relevant problems inadequate, but they are also unaware of that fact and position themselves as leaders nonetheless.

By way of contrast, King recognizes that agents of a number of different types in Birmingham need to work collaboratively to elaborate and enact interconnected responsibilities with a view to bringing an end to segregation. This requires that each agent work with others to understand their own current roles within the social, economic, and political institutions at issue: how is each agent implicated by their actions in the structural injustice of segregation, and in what ways might they be well positioned with respect to addressing it? Complacency as constituted in part by expectations of epistemic self-sufficiency is evident in the white clergymen's uncritically trusting the adequacy of their own standpoint on these matters. Expecting that you are epistemically self-sufficient is partly to trust in your own perspective unduly, expecting that you do not need to consider how differently racialized and class positioned others are conceiving of a situation and your role in it. The clergymen expect their own perspective to be adequate, confidently stating the best course of action. But of course, they should not take theirs as the only relevant perspective, and should be more suspicious of how the perspective they share has been shaped by prevailing relational dynamics in a structurally unjust context. King points out several of the ways in which their shared perspective is seriously limited, riddled by various forms of ignorance resulting from a lack of appropriate engagement with the local situation and with those most severely affected.

The white clergymen also expect to be in a position to evaluate the character of nonviolent resisters who do not share their preference for order and "common sense," as

manifested in their readiness to call these resisters out as unwise, unreasonably impatient, and extremist. Once again, this expresses how much they have come to rely on their own shared perspective: they expect to be capable of understanding the situation well enough to be critical and dismissive of everyone who they see as failing to align with what they see as the most "constructive and realistic approach." Importantly, the white clergymen default to talking *about* King and other civil rights leaders and activists in their statement, but not *to* and certainly not *with* them, in which case they would have addressed them by name, face to face. So, they are expressing disappointment with King and others, and yet neglecting to acknowledge any relational ties to them, showing through their behaviour that they do not expect to be accountable to leaders and other activists involved in the civil rights movement. Notably, they waited until King was safely behind bars to make their statement, reaffirming their tragic tendency towards monologue while further isolating an already isolated prisoner as an "outside agitator." Whereas King affirms being in relation with white clergymen and moderates, the clergymen cast judgment on nonviolent resisters in a way that shows either that they have no interest in having or building a relationship with them, or that they are marking the end of preexisting ones.

The significance of their statement's title, "A Call for Unity," cannot be overlooked. What the white clergymen are calling for here is for the diverse citizenry of Birmingham to unite and sort out their problems on their own, presenting a unified front to outsiders whose participation they seek to exclude. It is also a call that dismisses diversity and conflict within and among local communities, disavowing antagonisms along lines of race and class in relation to the segregationist status quo. As King points out, "A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had

no part in enacting or devising the law" (769). Much as black voters in the state of Alabama were prevented from becoming registered voters at the time (769), the white clergymen's behavior recapitulates the "devious methods" used to preclude the involvement of blacks in elaborating and enacting plans for desegregation under the seemingly noble veil of "unity."

5.3.3. Expecting to Discern One's Responsibilities on One's Own

By dismissing calls for support the white clergymen also show that they do not expect to be answerable to local blacks, while nevertheless expecting local blacks to be answerable to them in return. Indeed, it is significant that it was Shuttlesworth, a black minister from Birmingham, who had called King for help in the first place, for his was a call to which the white clergymen had already failed to listen and respond. The clergymen show themselves to be complacent by expressing through their behavior the expectation that they can issue calls for action but not be compelled to notice or respond to calls from others, assigning responsibilities to others without entertaining or assuming those responsibilities which others have assigned to them. As King points out, segregation in Birmingham is harming everyone—harming the "souls and personalities" of whites as well as blacks.

Given that everyone is morally damaged by segregation, though in different ways and to different degrees, King recognizes, further, that part of the stake of white clergymen and moderates in desegregation is in repairing their own damaged characters and lives in and through an ongoing process of repairing their relationships with blacks, and in working to build new, more trusting and mutually supportive relations. Indeed, part of what he finds

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troubling about their perspective on the situation, as expressed through their behavior and modes of relating to others, is the implicit denial of the fact that their characters are in any way in need of repair. Recall that complacency in my proposed sense is not about the specific *content* of an agent's perspective, so much as their *expectation* that their own perspective is the only relevant one—the *centering* of their own perspective and, in so doing, of themselves. As King saw so clearly, complacency is more a relational problem than a substantive one, which sets it apart from the "shallow understanding" and excessive "caution" that he also bemoans. It is not only or primarily that a complacent agent's perspective is "shallow," distorted, or incorrect, as the fact they have not considered the need to develop their own perspective in and through collaborative work with others. If white clergymen and moderates do not expect others to have the agency and authority to evaluate their characters as shaped in and through interpersonal and intergroup relations, they will not be very likely to think that they need to take responsibility for engaging in processes of relational repair, as they will not appreciate how morally damaged they have become under segregated circumstances.

Further troubling for any whites who would recognize the ways they have been damaged under segregation is the expectation that they are capable of repairing their damaged characters, lives, and relationships themselves, on their own initiative. It is partly because the white clergymen are normatively comfortable with the segregationist status quo that they do not expect to need to depend on differently racialized others epistemically, morally, and politically, let alone to eventually become interdependent in ways that express acknowledgement of the individuality and agency of all involved. Recognizing that white moderates do not expect to be answerable to the perspectives and evaluative

judgments of blacks, King is challenging their peculiar hubris, struggling to create openings for them to come to see themselves as playing supporting roles in the ongoing freedom struggle, neither from the sidelines nor at the center.

5.4. Repairing Character Damage: Remedying Complacency

Through my proposed reading of King's "Letter," I have been developing the claim that complacency is a form of motivational inertia that agents need to be "shaken out of," partly through being forced to recognize the epistemic and moral authority of oppressed peoples to evaluate their characters and hold them accountable for their inaction. Being shaken out of complacency is a process that agents will doubtless need to struggle through, for being forcefully decentered in these ways can be especially jarring—these are certainly not the sorts of experiences with which one comes to terms overnight. Moreover, when I emphasize the processual nature of being shaken out of complacency in what follows, I should also not be read as suggesting that complacency with respect to complex social and ecological problems has been, or ever could be, addressed in full. Becoming the kind of person, group, community, or organization that is capable of working collaboratively with others, sharing power and responsibilities rather than wielding power over them, is not the sort of process that can ever be considered complete, nor is it the sort of process that can be worked through on one's own.

With these remarks in mind, I now want to turn to building a case for what processes of remedying complacency involve by charting connections between the diagnostic work of King and the related work of white, male, feminist and anti-racist organizer Chris Crass. I have chosen to focus on Crass's organizing work here for several reasons. First of all, I

understand Crass to be among those of my contemporaries who have taken up King's loving challenges, incorporating them into his own strategies for building multiracial, intergenerational movements for collective liberation. His organizing has been heavily influenced by that of King and a number of other participants in the black freedom movement of the 1960s, including Ella Baker and Howard Thurman, as well as by contemporary black feminist scholar-activists, such as bell hooks and Angela Davis, who have drawn upon and developed further this rich tradition of collective thought and practice. I also find Crass's work attractive because of the way he self-consciously seeks to learn lessons from the various successes and failures of past movements, partly to help avoid repeating mistakes as far as possible, while also enabling recognition of genuinely new mistakes as opening possibilities for growth (rather than continuing to avoid participation out of fear of making them). Crass has spent most of his adult life organizing predominantly white communities through sustained conversations with frontline communities of color engaged in struggles for economic, social, and environmental justice, with a view to bringing an end to the ongoing domination of lands and of peoples. His participation in collective initiatives such as Food Not Bombs, the Catalyst Project, and the Colours of Resistance network is instructive in a number of ways, perhaps most notably in that he has consistently focused on repairing the damage inflicted on members of diverse communities under circumstances of systemic domination and oppression as integral to working to build movements aimed at creating alternative structural arrangements.

What, then, could the thought and practice of King and Crass reveal about what is involved in remedying complacency? Taking as my point of departure the diagnostic

work of King, I want to suggest that settled expectations of self-sufficiency are most likely to be *un*settled in and through efforts to shift relationships in ways that create possibilities for behaving and knowing otherwise. Drawing further lessons from the organizing work of Crass, I will now go on to argue that such efforts can be thought of as involving a number of related "stages," including, though probably not limited to, the following ten. Rather than items to be checked off in a linear progression towards completion, I suspect that each of these stages needs continually to be revisited as part of ongoing processes of collective practice and reflection. Awkward though it admittedly is, I hope that the language of "stages" will nevertheless prove useful for the sake of analysis so long as these caveats are kept in the forefront of the reader's imagination.

First of all, those of us who are committed to building healthier and more meaningful lives, relationships, communities, and societies are invited to *take responsibility for the extent of the damage done to our characters under oppressive circumstances*—that is, for who we are in relation to the history and present configuration of society, as well as for who we might need to become and what needs to be done to start moving in that direction. After all, working through complacency with respect to complex social and ecological problems such as the mass incarceration of people of color and the mass extinctions resulting from climate change would seem to involve learning how to analyze these structural problems together with differently positioned and situated others; to develop strategies and tactics for responding to those problems; and then to put those strategies into practice, reflecting collectively on the experience of implementing them as part of a continuous process of fostering collective empowerment. If King's diagnosis and my efforts to make its subtler elements explicit are taken seriously, then remedying

complacency must be a matter of coming to expect that prevailing relationships and the institutions that organize them will continue to inflict manifold harms and damage on differently located and situated peoples; asking those who are most directly and severely affected what work has already and has yet to be done; and expecting to be capable of playing an active, supporting role in working toward more just and human circumstances through the enactment of *relational solidarity* (more on this concept below).

It follows from the account of complacency I have been developing that a great deal of what is involved in repairing character damage occurs through working to shift relationships among people with varying kinds and degrees of privilege and power. Indeed, remedying complacency seems to require a willingness to take risks in repairing and working to build new relationships together with others. As Crass writes, "As more and more of us take risks, build relationships, and learn to work collaboratively, we begin to create a practice of collective leadership," which, in turn, helps prevent expectations of self-sufficiency from settling back in (Crass 2012, 267). A crucial point that I want to emphasize from my reading of King's "Letter" is that in pushing his audience to recognize how disappointing they are, and what it is that makes them so disappointing to others, King is also emphasizing that they do not and could not understand what it is like to be so deeply disappointed as a member of a racially- and class-oppressed group. The implications of this are significant: King is asserting that white people cannot presume to be able to encapsulate the perspectives and frames of reference of blacks, forcing them to acknowledge the need to collaborate in sorting out the nature of the problems at issue. I take it that acknowledgment of this sort is among the first steps involved in remedying complacency with respect to racial oppression, for it affirms being in relation with blacks

while rendering whites accountable to their evaluative judgments, both of the relationally constituted characters of members of predominantly white communities and of the social circumstances under which they live—which, I have argued, are deeply interconnected.

Unsettling expectations of self-sufficiency must also involve learning to listen actively to members of oppressed groups. For example, relatively privileged and powerful white people tend to expect that they should be able to choose *for themselves* which "issues" of social and environmental justice to work on, as well as where and how to do the work. However, this skirts over the matters of whether and to what extent they and their communities are currently implicated in the perpetuation of certain problems, and how; how others have historically addressed and are currently working to address the problems in question, especially members of the communities most directly and severely affected; what useful skills, if any, they possess as individuals; and where they might be needed most, and by whom, if their participation is needed by anyone at all. Entrenched tendencies to discount or ignore all of the above concerns need continually to be challenged, for they cover over possibilities that can only be explored and acted upon in the context of working to build respectful, trusting relations. Of course, it is to be expected that there will be resistance to the unsettling of individualistic expectations, fear of change, of appearing inexperienced, of doing something new, and so on, although these are better seen not simply as tests of commitment or "strength of will," but rather as opportunities to draw upon and strengthen available relational supports while collectively navigating associated risks.

Remedying complacency among relatively privileged and powerful agents further involves taking leadership from, and learning to share power and responsibility horizontally with, others operating at the center of various struggles. As possibilities for so doing are opened in the context of shifting away from prevailing relational dynamics, settled expectations of playing the role of the hero, the leader, or even of being recognized as particularly important, can gradually be undermined, making room for the assumption of more respectful and sustainable roles. Harking back to themes expressed earlier in his "Letter," in his posthumously published essay, "A Testament of Hope," King writes:

> I believe there is an important place in our struggle for white liberals and I hope that their present estrangement from our movement is only temporary. But many white people in the past joined our movement with a kind of messianic faith that they were going to save the Negro and solve all of his problems very quickly. They tended, in some instances, to be rather aggressive and insensitive to the opinions and abilities of the black people with whom they were working; this has been especially true of students. In many cases, they simply did not know how to work in a supporting, secondary role. I think this problem became most evident when young men and women from elite Northern universities came down to Mississippi to work with the black students at Tougaloo and Rust colleges, who were not quite as articulate, didn't type quite as fast and were not as sophisticated. Inevitably, feelings of white paternalism and black inferiority became exaggerated (King 1969, 194).

In order to nurture the conditions for mutual respect among people working to build a liberatory movement, King is here suggesting that individuals and communities need to work consciously and effortfully to shift previously constituted relations of power and to develop one another's capacities and skills. Yet recall that the white clergymen acted as though they would be able to determine the correct course of action, as well as their own roles and responsibilities, without being directly involved in the black freedom struggle. Echoing and developing further some of King's insights, Crass describes behavior of this

sort as manifesting a tendency to "critique from the sidelines" rather than "leading from the center." "White anti-racists need to be doing, not just talking," he writes:

> Picking things apart is a skill white people are often more interested in practicing than the slow and difficult practice of organizing—meeting people where they are at, bringing people together, building organizations and alliances, developing long-term strategies with short-term plans, and implementing organizing efforts that have the possibility to transform people's daily lives towards our larger visions of liberation. We cannot stay on the sidelines in this struggle. There's too much at stake. And this is where it gets messy, but it also gets beautiful, brilliant, full of joy, heartache, learning, and possibility. It's also where we see glimpses of the new world in the shell of the old (268).

As noted earlier, in his "Letter" King is not merely trying to win an argument over strategy and tactics, or to impose the philosophy and methods of nonviolent direct action on others. What he is doing, though, is affirming existing relationships among movement participants, as well as with white clergymen and moderates more generally, while also unearthing the social tensions that are preventing these groups from learning to work collaboratively—and in so doing, helping to spur necessary relational growth in view of ostensibly shared aims. Although he definitely sees blacks as at the center of the ongoing freedom struggle, King never loses sight of the fact that their actions are conditioned by and also have effects on the decisions and actions of agents of other types operating at the same and different levels, and that how white sympathizers relate to those at the center when negotiating what is to be done, and when to do it, is crucially important.

I draw from this the lesson that remedying complacency involves showing respect and cultivating love for the people with whom one is always already in relation and working towards collaborating, affirming and working to repair relations with those whose social experiences and evaluative judgments one does not and could never fully understand. As

King puts it, "Integration is meaningless without the sharing of power. When I speak of integration, I don't mean a romantic mixing of colors, I mean a real sharing of power and responsibility" (231). Notably, Crass reemphasizes the kind of love King describes when he opposes "the traditional concept of solidarity, which can involve a rational calculus of interests between groups of people," with an "expansive generosity of spirit that opens the space for mutual transformation" (257). I want to suggest that it is precisely because one does not and could never fully understand the perspectives of all those one is relating to and possibly collaborating with that one can be challenged and transformed in ways that are ongoing and often unexpected. Durable motivation for working against the domination of lands and of peoples and towards more just, sustainable societies does not stem from having all the facts and knowing what to do, as it is more importantly about building relationships with those one cares about and to whom one is prepared to be accountable, finding meaning in processes of mutually transformation guided by visions creatively articulated together. Although Crass offers no name for his proposed alternative to the "traditional" concept of solidarity, *relational solidarity* nicely captures the generous and potentially transformative alternative to which he is here gesturing.

With this thought in mind, remedying complacency must also involve being rendered accountable to the judgments of others, including evaluative judgments of relationally constituted character. Being rendered accountable further involves learning to recognize one's own subtle and not-so-subtle tactics for discrediting or dismissing what others have to say about one. When King pushes white moderates and clergymen to realize that they could not fully understand how disappointing they are to him and other blacks who have endured oppressive harms for so long, I take it that he is also pushing through their fears

of acknowledging that there are structural barriers to self- and social understanding that can only be tenuously bridged by building relationships of trust with differently racialized others. Indeed, he is *demanding* that the clergymen recognize that he and others *do* have a say as to whether and in what ways they are disappointing. Yet acknowledging as much can be frightening, as it can be difficult for certain people to surrender some of the power to evaluate themselves, especially to others whom they have grown accustomed to seeing as socially subordinate in a highly stratified society. As Crass describes his own relationally fostered perspective as a white American male:

> I've been socialized most of my life to speak my mind, to take my opinions and thoughts seriously. Teachers, parents, and other adults have looked at kids like me as the "future of this country." Pictures of people who look like me (white, male, and assuredly heterosexual) fill the history books and are celebrated as the smartest and brightest who have ever lived (159).

It is no easy task to work through the fear of giving up on having these promises realized, and allow oneself to be opened to loving alternatives instead of translating that fear into anger and resentment.

Part of what makes being rendered accountable in these ways so easy to avoid is that under such circumstances as segregation and mass incarceration, for example, it is customary for communities of white knowers to simply discount or discredit the evaluative judgments of blacks. As Jean Harvey and Sue Campbell have argued at length, cognitive and psychological undermining are some of the staples of systems of domination and oppression (Harvey 1999; Campbell 2003). Being rendered accountable to the judgments of differently racialized others would seem to involve, in part, coming to grips with the fact that others can be doing more than simply leveling blame when evaluating particular structures or traits of character. For example, another person or

group might be drawing attention to systemic patterns of character damage for which I am not solely and wholly responsible for acquiring and correcting, but for which it is still important for me to take responsibility going forward out of a shared commitment to liberatory aspirations and the closely related need to build relationships of trust and respect. By conversing with and becoming informed by the perspectives of differently racialized others, I am made vulnerable to judgments the sources of which I am not well-positioned to understand in full, opening spaces for being rendered accountable to others in ways that encourage and strengthen everyone's participation in efforts to transform the institutional contexts of our lives.

Now, recall that the problems associated with racial segregation in the city of Birmingham seem to have been apparent to—if not as well understood by—many of the people and communities involved, and it may not have been entirely clear what should be done to address them. Still, some might worry that the paradigm examples of complacency I have addressed in previous chapter (i.e., the mass incarceration of people of color, and global climate change) are ones for which interconnected responsibilities are significantly less clear than they were in the context of the civil rights movement. Yet I would urge that these cases are not so different after all: each of the complex problems at issue cannot be addressed without collective action; in each instance there are a number of agents who are heavily invested in maintaining the status quo; and in each there are also a diverse array of agents who are sensitive to the existence and character of the problems, are concerned about them and committed to addressing them, and somehow need to learn to work collaboratively with an eye to doing just that. Moreover, in each of these cases, many agents exhibit a tendency to cope with the uncertainty about what is to

be done and when to do it by deciding on their own, as an individual or a community, as opposed to working together with those who are most severely affected to analyze the structural sources of the problems at issue, to elaborate strategies for responding to those problems, and to enact the interconnected responsibilities assigned to one another in the process.

Drawing on one of the central claims of Chapter 3, I also want to reinforce that undoing ignorance with respect to complex social and ecological problems is integral to, but not the same thing as, being "shaken out of" complacency, for the latter is not so much about coming to have the correct view of the world as it is about no longer expecting to ever have an encompassing view as a distinctively positioned and situated knower and relating to others accordingly. Complacency cannot be remedied by simply raising awareness and increasing public understanding of specific problems, for it also involves working together to shift prevailing relational dynamics, engaging in collective action and reflection, and building movements aimed at addressing the problems in question. For example, the problem of global climate change *is*, at least in large part, that agents of a number of different types need to get down to the work of elaborating the interconnected responsibilities the coordinated enactment of which is needed to move toward an alternative vision of sustainable society. Thus, beyond coming to grips with the existence and character of the problem, being "shaken out of" complacency with respect to climate change involves forcefully coming to grips with the need to work together with numerous others to articulate and move towards visions of more just and sustainable futures.

In his own work, Crass describes the personal changes involved as deeper than merely

changing what one believes, undergoing a shift in perspective and focus, or eventually

managing to "get things right." After all, changing one's perspective can take place in the

absence of, and is importantly different than, shifting relationships with others whom one

already is—or at least hopes to be—working alongside, as well as from articulating

visions with and taking a public stand by the side of those others. "In almost thirty years

of peace and justice work," writes Crass, "I have come to believe that where we put our

bodies is one of the most powerful experiences to change our world personally and

politically." As he explains further,

> We change standing on a picket line at 7 a.m. day after day next to someone
> who does not look like us, demanding minority contracts and hiring. We
> change when, in all our queerness, we join striking United Food and
> Commercial Workers' union members outside the Fischer Meat Packing
> Company, flyer a gay bar that's hosting a white comedian in blackface, or
> struggle with LGBT people about opposing the death penalty or
> militarization. We change when we keep showing up for someone who may
> not trust us yet, and who later testifies on behalf of LGBT equality at city
> hall. And we change when Black, Brown, and white lesbians get arrested
> protesting police abuse together with a Black minister and a mother whose
> son was stomped to death by city jailors (224).

In order to support what is often the tremendously challenging work of transforming

collectively over the long haul, Crass suggests that,

> We need culture that celebrates and nourishes the creativity, beauty, and joy
> of this world while we struggle against oppression and exploitation. We need
> culture that builds people up rather than tearing them down. We need culture
> that reminds us that there are many paths to the goals we seek, rather than one
> right answer. We need culture that nourishes, teaches, and encourages us to
> win and create the changes in society we need (22).

Organizers working to build social movements clearly have important roles to play in

helping individuals and communities to get engaged in processes of working through

complacency. If expectations of self-sufficiency have settled in, or end up resettling,

individuals and communities are likely to end up feeling inadequate, isolated, and powerless when confronted with complex social and ecological problems. Moreover, they may not see the need to repair and build new relationships with others; to challenge prevailing myths of society while coming to grips with social realities through the elaboration of structural analyses; to imaginatively articulate visions of sustainable community, education, work, and so on; and to engage in collective action and reflection through the enactment of interconnected responsibilities. Individuals, in particular, will continue seeing themselves narrowly as agents of behavioural and lifestyle change, and so have need only for a short-term perspective on change (say, within their lifetime) that makes comparably little reference to background organizations and institutions. As Crass points out, organizers see it as their task to support others in working through the feelings commonly associated with complacency, helping them to see themselves as agents of social-historical change by taking a long-term perspective on the interrelatedness of personal and structural transformation. Ultimately, the challenge is not just to educate but to get people in motion together when so many are currently disengaged, and to help one another realize that being in motion for structural change is an intrinsically valuable and deeply meaningful way of living. "Understanding that we will forever be a work in progress helps ensure that the work on white privilege and racism are not tacked on, or checked off as one more task to complete, but are rather integral to the ongoing journey," writes Crass. "Together, across the color lines, we try to find the ways to make progress even as we know that journey is never completed" (234).

Because people need support when it comes to taking responsibility for character damage as engaging in long-term struggles for structural transformation, it comes as no surprise

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that supporting people to "come together and overcome isolation and feelings of inadequacy is one of the key tasks of organizers," which can only be accomplished "by developing a systemic understanding of the problems we face, nurturing relationships of solidarity and respect, building up collective power through action, and working for social change in ways that also help us grow and live our values in the here and now" (14). Engaging in this sort of work involves, "developing strategy that supports people's personal and political development, builds organizations and community through struggles to concretely change the conditions in which we live and through those struggles builds the power to transform society" (35). Of course, it need not only be "organizers" who come to see these as among their many tasks. Grandparents, parents, partners, children, friends, teachers, coworkers, and numerous others with whom we are in relations can also take up the complicated work of supporting one each other's personal and political development.

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