

## **How does oppression twist our agency? Anna-Bella Sicilia**

*Abstract:* Feminists are concerned with the unjust distribution of material and epistemic resources; oppression makes women and gender minorities worse off and deprives us of concepts for understanding this disadvantage. More intriguingly, some strands of feminism also take the unjust distribution of *agential capacities* to be a central locus of oppression and thus a central concern for the movement. If oppression disadvantages us *qua* agents – not just materially or epistemically – this raises a series of philosophically and politically pressing questions. What are the mechanisms through which oppressive environments twist agency? What does the nature of agential injustice tell us about the nature and value of agency more generally? And what are the most promising avenues for resistance?

The now-familiar answer to the first of these questions appeals to J.L. Austin’s notion of *uptake*: the treatment of oppressed persons as agentially *incapable* via uptake denial is precisely what renders them unable to act. Because a disabled woman is treated as unable to *consent* to a medical procedure, for instance, she tries but fails to consent to the procedure. In this paper I argue that this oversimplifies the mechanism through which oppression twists our agency supplementing this “uptake denial model” with what I call the “agential contribution model.” Oppression sometimes distorts agency by requiring overly-demanding agential contributions of those considered to be uniquely capable agents.

*Key words:* Feminist Philosophy, Oppression, Agency, Forgiveness

Feminists are concerned with the unjust distribution of material and epistemic resources; oppression makes women and gender minorities worse off and deprives us of concepts for understanding this disadvantage. Perhaps more intriguingly, some strands of feminism also take the unjust distribution of *agential capacities* to be a central locus of oppression and thus a central concern for the movement. If oppression disadvantages us *qua* agents – not just materially or epistemically – this raises a series of philosophically and politically pressing questions. What are the mechanisms through which oppressive environments affect our agency? What does the nature of agential injustice tell us about the nature and value of agency more generally? And what are the most promising avenues for resistance?

The body of work aimed at theorizing this dimension of oppression – what I will call “agency feminism” – has made piecemeal progress on some of these questions, often leaving foundational questions about agency unexplored.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I draw together several agency feminist threads to make progress on the first: namely, what are the *mechanisms* of agential injustice? A now-familiar answer appeals to the significance of “uptake”. When bad ideology leads us to treat a disabled woman as unable to *consent* to a medical procedure, she utters the same words as her nondisabled male counterpart yet fails to successfully consent. On a

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of agency feminist discussions, see Frye 1983; Dotson 2011; R. Kukla 2014; Khader 2011; Calhoun 2015; Hirji 2021; Hirji 2024; Ward forthcoming. I take work on how the distribution of violent pornography affects women’s ability *refuse* and perform other speech acts to be agency feminist; see MacKinnon 1987; Langton 1993; Hornsby 1995; Langton and Hornsby 1998; McGowan 2003; McGowan 2014; West 2003; Maitra 2009; Mikkola 2011. See also Sally Haslanger’s work (especially Haslanger 2018; Haslanger 2017) for explicit discussion of how social practices (including oppressive ones) constrain and enable our agency.

straightforward interpretation of this view, treatment of a person's agential capacities as subpar is precisely what affects their agential capacities. Call this the "uptake denial model".

While exploration of the uptake denial model has been both fruitful and influential, it oversimplifies the mechanisms of agential injustice. In this paper, I do three things to advance discussion on this topic. First, I draw out two strands of agency feminist thought and diagnose an over-emphasis on uptake in these discussions. Second, I argue for a distinct and neglected mechanism through which oppression distorts the agency of oppressed persons. In cases of complex actions, distortion can occur when oppressed agents are treated as particularly agentially capable. I call this the "agential contribution model". On this picture, arbitrary identity facts systematically shape the contours of various complex actions by requiring agents with oppressed identities to make greater (or more demanding) agential contributions to perform the very same act-types as their dominantly-situated counterparts. While the agential contribution model leaves oppressed agents *capable* of acting – unlike the uptake denial model –, it makes their path to action more circuitous than the one faced by members of privileged groups. In closing, I complicate the relationship between these models, arguing that they are two sides of the same coin.

## 1. Agency under oppression and uptake denial

In *The Politics of Reality*, Marilyn Frye offers a compelling illustration of the relationship between oppression and agency. In her example, a woman grows frustrated with a mechanic's fiddling with her carburetor (which she had carefully adjusted) and tells him to stop. Rather than give her angry communication uptake, he replies by calling her a "crazy bitch." This refusal to see her anger as communicative prevents the woman from communicating anything with her anger: "Deprived of uptake, the woman's anger is left as just a burst of expression of individual feeling. As a social act, an act of communication, it just doesn't happen."<sup>2</sup> Precisely because her testimonial audience – acting in accordance with pervasive sexist norms – treats her as unable to act, she fails to. In another influential case, a woman finds herself unable to refuse sex by saying "no" precisely because she is treated by her assailant as unable to do so. As Rae Langton famously argues, the proliferation of violent pornography can lead to a state of affairs in which "'no,' when spoken by a woman, does not *count* as the act of refusal."<sup>3</sup>

Two strands of agency feminist thought arrive at these provocative conclusions in different ways. The first strand embraces what I will call a "practice view of act-types". On such a view, we perform particular acts by meeting standards internal to practices in which they take place. We cannot perform the act of *getting a base hit* unless we do so in a context where the standards for such an action are applicable and intelligible to others (a baseball game).<sup>4</sup> So, widely-shared social practices constrain and enable our agential capacities by setting up their success

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<sup>2</sup> Frye 1983, 89

<sup>3</sup> Langton 1993, 321

<sup>4</sup> See Millgram 2020 on the "practice view of action" (a term I borrow and slightly amend). The baseball examples come from Rawls 1955, and Schapiro 2001 extends Rawls' discussion to a more general view about the structure of all actions. Thanks to Sarah Stroud for helpful discussion.

conditions. On this view, bodily or mental movements count as the act-types they do because they are practice-dependent “moves.”

While this is most obvious in the context of games, it’s plausible that we also need to meet *some* external standard to perform actions even when these standards are loosely defined. There are no codified rules for what it takes to *thank* someone, for instance. But can we really thank someone if our actions – deviating completely from the standards for thanking in our culture – fail to be intelligible as thanking by all? Thus, some agency feminist discussions extend this framework, holding that the practices that establish success conditions for our actions include not only rule- or law-governed procedures (getting a base hit, marrying, putting my opponent in checkmate). They also include social practices that emerge organically whenever we coordinate our lives with others. This means a wide swath of socially-significant action (apologizing, rebelling, loving) count as these act-types in virtue of meeting practice-dependent success conditions.<sup>5</sup>

This approach represents a significant shift in emphasis from that of traditional action theoretic discussion. Much traditional discussion focuses on what sort of contributions properly initiate and guide a being’s bodily (or mental) movements, such that we describe these movements as exercises of agency. Theorists disagree about what – belief and desire, intention, a properly-structured will – serve as the proper *sources* for actions as opposed to mere behaviors.<sup>6</sup> The question “What distinguishes action from mere behavior?” is distinct from the question “What individuates actions as particular act-types?”, yet action theorists tend to write as if the answer to the former question fully addresses the latter.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary action theorists therefore primarily individuate act-types by appealing to the *sources* of agency: performing a particular act-type successfully is a matter of succeeding *by the agent’s own lights* – say, by executing her intention.

But, as the practice view of act-types brings out, our ability to perform a given act-type depends not only on the *source* of our bodily movement, but also on its *meaning*. Actions succeed by *others’* lights. As Sally Haslanger distinguishes these two approaches:

The contrast between mere behavior and intentional action depends, it seems, on the state of mind of the agent (allowing that the state of mind may be dispositional).

However, another distinction worth drawing is between meaningful and meaningless behavior. The way I swing, or raise, or extend my arms, may or may not have meaning in a particular context.<sup>8</sup>

Individuating act-types on the basis of their public meaning (rather than only their sources) allows us to explain how the expressive content of my movements depends on the social environment in which it takes place. The action I perform is not exclusively “up to me” in the

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<sup>5</sup> See Ward 2025, 3 on the idea that “agency is contextual.”

<sup>6</sup> This is sometimes called the “problem of action” (Frankfurt 1978; Donagan 1981).

<sup>7</sup> As Candace Vogler summarizes, “Anscombe’s act-types take their sense from the proximate end of the action in question (*as do the act-types at issue in subsequent analytic philosophical action theory*).” (Vogler 2013, 245; my italics)

<sup>8</sup> Haslanger 2018, 235

way suggested by traditional approaches alone. Successful action is the product of both my agential contributions and the way others make sense of them. Whether we agree with Haslanger that “[*m*]ost actions depend for their identity on satisfying constitutive norms of a practice”, it seems clear that this is an illuminating approach to understanding a wide range of actions.<sup>9</sup> A key contribution of the practice view of act-types is the idea that *meaningful action* – rather than “mere” (meaningless) action – is a, or even *the*, proper subject of action theory. We care more about making agential contributions that are plausibly intelligible to others as particular act-types than about merely acting intentionally. It is one thing to distinguish *waving* from muscle spasms, and another to distinguish *meaningful* waving – where others can understand and treat what I’m doing as a greeting – from mere, meaningless waving. In answering the question, “What individuates behavior as a particular act-type?”, this view treats practices as prior to an individual’s agential contributions (including her mental states and behaviors).

A second strand of agency feminist thought reverses this order, treating agential contributions as prior to practices, but adopting an expansive view of whose agential contributions matter, and emphasizing that practices nonetheless constrain the range of actions we might perform. This strand of thought emerges in feminist speech act theory and focuses on J.L. Austin’s notion of “uptake”.<sup>10</sup> As such, these theorists discuss what agents do *with their words*, narrowing their focus to speech acts. They point out that what a person can do with her words often depends on the agential contributions of her *audience*: the relevant witnesses to her (attempted) action. We can “give someone uptake” by understanding and treating her as performing the speech act she’s trying to perform, and such treatment can enable her performance. On the other hand, we can “deny someone uptake” and thereby prevent her from acting.<sup>11</sup> Much like the “practice view of act-types”, this view emphasizes that we don’t successfully act just by performing intended behaviors, succeeding “by our own lights.” As Quill Kukla writes, “Actions are individuated by what they *accomplish*, and intending does not in and of itself accomplish anything.”<sup>12</sup> To accomplish something – to pull off the intended act-type – one has to get her audience to play along. Social practices have an important role here, too: they determine the possible act-types an uptaker can effectively render a speaker’s contribution. In Kukla’s example, “If you say, ‘I bet he’s going to be late again’ and I respond, ‘Yeah that would be typical’, then I help constitute your speech act as a prediction”; on the other hand, “if I respond, ‘OK, how much? I’ll take that bet!’ then I may constitute your speech act as a bet.”<sup>13</sup> The fact that a person *bets* is, first and foremost, explained by the agential contributions of the speaker and their audience. But the availability of social practices mean they could have *predicted* or *bet* with those words, but not, for instance, *married*.

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<sup>9</sup> Haslanger 2019, 111 (italics added)

<sup>10</sup> Austin 1962

<sup>11</sup> “Constitution theorists” about uptake defend this view; see Langton 2018; Tanesini 2020; R. Kukla 2009; R. Kukla 2014; Q. R. Kukla 2023; Harrison and Tanter 2024. Harrison and Tanter de-emphasize the role of practices, focusing instead on the possibility of other members of the discursive community providing “overriding uptake.”

<sup>12</sup> Q. R. Kukla 2023, 2

<sup>13</sup> Q. R. Kukla 2023, 7

Both strands of thought share a concern with how injustice functions to systematically deprive certain persons of their ability to act. Social practices are not only influenced by ideology, but often constitute aspects of ideology.<sup>14</sup> On the practice view of act-types, this means we must meet sexist/racist/ableist/etc. standards to act. And, according to feminist speech act theorists, some of these social practices mean we are more likely to deny certain kinds of persons uptake for their speech. The capacity to perform socially-important actions is unjustly distributed in environments where oppressive ideology sets the standards, or where it makes uptake harder to come by.

In Frye's case, the mechanic is unable or unwilling to give the woman's expression of anger uptake because his social world tends not to treat women as meeting the success conditions for communications of righteous anger. A robust ideological practice casts her as something other than a proper *communicator* (at least on this topic). He might also fail to treat her as a knower – a possessor and manager of knowledge – in accordance with widely-shared practices.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps he constitutes her words as an instance of meaningless hysterics rather than the intended communicative contribution. She can't act because of social practices whereby she's not (likely to be) treated as capable of acting.<sup>16</sup> Following the basic form of cases like this, the unjust distribution of agency is thought of primarily as a matter of *downgraded*, *suboptimal*, or even *denied* agency.

While the two strands of agency feminism have importantly different stories to tell about agency, I'll largely set aside their differences here.<sup>17</sup> My concern is primarily with the emergence of this “uptake denial model” as a dominant model for agential injustice. As Serene Khader frames the “agency dilemma” in feminist theorizing, we are forced to choose between “agency affirmation” and “agency denial”, asking: “should we see oppressed people as agents whose choices are worthy of unquestioning respect or victims who cannot make genuine choices?”<sup>18</sup> Opting for “agency affirmation” is problematic insofar as it risks “obscuring the reality of [women's] victimization”.<sup>19</sup> The implication is that “downgrading” women's agency is the source of injustice, and that “upgrading” this agency, while not a *manifestation* of injustice, is risky only insofar as it leads us to overlook the real injustice of downgraded agency. As we will see in the next section, this obscures how “upgrading” can, itself, manifest agential injustice.

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<sup>14</sup> Haslanger 2017

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Little 1995; Lloyd 1984 on the long history of these practices, and see Fricker 2007 on how this interacts with belief.

<sup>16</sup> Here and throughout, I bypass the question of whether others sincerely believe, perceive, or understand those attempting to act as capable of doing so, focusing instead on cases where social practices have us *treating* her as unable to do so. This is not to neglect the significance of these epistemic states, but rather to highlight that public treatment is, ultimately, what empowers or disempowers others to act. (See Manne 2017, chapter 2 for defense of a similar point in relation to misogyny.)

<sup>17</sup> I take up the significance of these differences in other work in preparation.

<sup>18</sup> Khader 2011, 31. The terminology of agency affirmation and denial comes from Ward 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Khader 2011, 30

## **2. The agential contribution model**

In this section, I supplement these agency feminist discussions with some uncontroversial observations about the nature of complex action. Take the rather complex action of *forgiving*. Forgiving depends on various more-basic actions like *speaking, embracing, cooking a meal, typing a text message*. And these, in turn, depend on even more basic actions (*moving one's mouth, wrapping one's arms...*).<sup>20</sup> Theorists of forgiveness insist that these more-basic actions must properly come under certain descriptions for persons to count as having forgiven. I shall remain as neutral as possible about the precise nature of forgiveness itself, but common candidates include: (1) withdrawing, overcoming, or suppressing negative emotions (resentment, blame, disappointment) toward the wrongdoer, (2) refraining from, tempering, or forswearing certain overt responses to the forgiven wrong (displays of anger, retaliation, withdrawal), (3) (re)establishing positive emotions toward – or relations with – the wrongdoer, and/or (4) explicitly stating one's forgiveness or acceptance of apology. On some views, for instance, forgiving depends on one *explicitly stating her forgiveness*, whether she does so via *typing a text message, whispering, or shouting across the yard*.

We have seen that agency feminists think social practices govern which more-basic actions *count as* – or, are *more likely to receive uptake as* – certain complex actions. And these practices often cast us in roles that vary by social identity. This means the more-basic actions a member of some oppressed group must perform to count as (or be likely to receive uptake for) successfully forgiving may be different from the more-basic actions that a dominantly-situated person must perform to do the same. In cases like this, successfully forgiving requires different agential contributions of different people. To say that these differing standards are oppressive is to say that they systematically function to subordinate a social group.

With these additional pieces in place, we can now identify a second mechanism through which oppression distorts our agency. On the “agential contribution model,” arbitrary identity facts systematically shape the contours of various complex actions, requiring agents with oppressed identities to make more (or more demanding) agential contributions to perform the very same act-types as their dominantly-situated counterparts. This forces us to look beyond cases in which an oppressed person is treated as a *suboptimal* agent. Indeed, she sometimes finds her agency distorted by the fact that she is treated as uniquely capable of performing some action.

### **2.1. Forgiving under oppression**

To make this more concrete, I turn to the hypothesis that the standards for performing acts like forgiving are sexist. They systematically require women (and feminine-presenting people)

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<sup>20</sup> I assume the existence of *more* and *less* basic actions, though I don't take a stance here about the existence of genuinely basic actions. Nor does what I say hang on any particular view about the relationship between more- and less- basic actions; less-basic actions might be constituted by more-basic ones, caused by them, or depend on them in some other way. To simplify language, I sometimes refer to more-basic actions “counting as” less-basic actions.

to make more demanding agential contributions than men (and masculine-presenting people). Consider the ideological practices through which we treat women as responsible for a disproportionate amount of emotional and relationship management labor. Women are treated as possessing “natural” skill at maintaining relational harmony. These amount to notable differences in what Arlie Hochschild calls the “going rate” – the expectable desirable attitude or behavior for a man or woman in one’s social context.<sup>21</sup> Given this, successfully performing the acts on which forgiveness depends *qua* woman might require that one not only engage in open-minded and emotionally vulnerable conversations, but must also *plan, sensitively initiate, and thoughtfully process* these conversations in ways that men are not expected to.<sup>22</sup> Managing one’s emotions in forgiving ways may not only require that one suppress overt resentment, but that one wholeheartedly banishes resentment, such that she can exhibit the warmth and softness expected of someone of her gender. If men are not expected to be as emotionally forthcoming or verbally communicative, they may, plausibly, clear the bar for (say) suppressing negative emotions in the forgiving way *more easily*. Most clearly, if forgiveness requires *restoring* pre-wrongdoing relations, and if these relations were at baseline more emotionally demanding for a woman than for a man, restoring relations will be more demanding for her. If these differing expectations are part of a robust social practice, forgiving looks different for people of different genders. The agential contributions required of women to perform these acts plausibly require more planning, effort, vulnerability, self-regulation, and social sensitivity.

Previous theorists of forgiveness have aptly noted the relationship between forgiveness and oppression, including its association with “essentially feminine” traits as well as its racialized dimensions. But these discussions either focus on a tendency to *morally evaluate* acts of forgiveness along gender/race lines (rather than on our actual ability to forgive)<sup>23</sup> or focus on how the uptake denial model can inhibit an oppressed persons’ abilities to forgive.<sup>24</sup> My focus here is slightly different. I want to suggest that many of the more-basic actions on which successful forgiveness depends are the sorts of actions that people with certain identities are systematically expected to perform in more effortful, wholehearted, attention-requiring ways – and so, require this effort if they are to be treated as doing them at all.

If this is correct, the agency of women is distorted under oppression, but in a very different way than the uptake denial model suggests. On the uptake denial model, one’s ability to forgive is affected insofar as ideology casts her ability to do so as subpar or defective. But this doesn’t seem to be the best way of understanding cases like this. It would be strange to say that women are understood as *unable* to forgive, since the stereotypes at issue cast women as forgivers *par excellence*. In forgiving others, women go the extra mile. Women are *more* forgiving and *better* at forgiving – especially when this serves men’s interests.<sup>25</sup> Social practices assign women responsibility for processing and overcoming relational rifts willingly, proactively, and without complaint. Given this, these practices don’t prevent her from forgiving by treating her as

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<sup>21</sup> Hochschild 2003, 54

<sup>22</sup> See Anderson 2023 on the gendered dimensions of relationship management labor.

<sup>23</sup> MacLachlan 2009; Cherry 2021; Norlock 2008

<sup>24</sup> Milam and Brunning 2018

<sup>25</sup> Manne 2017

unable to do so. To the contrary, she is seen as *such* a capable forgiver that she must perform this complex act via a more circuitous and demanding route than her male counterparts. Similar observations apply to various other complex actions – thanking, respecting, ordering, apologizing, caring, listening – as their standards apply to members of various oppressed groups.

Of course, there is nothing odd about the fact that we often perform different more-basic actions to successfully undertake the same complex ones. You might send a message by dropping a piece of paper in a mailbox, while I perform the same action by clicking “send” in my email. You might light a fire by striking a match while I rub two sticks together. You might even forgive differently from me, simply because of our different personal styles. This flexibility is simply part of the nature of complex action, and there is nothing inherently unjust about it. What is notable about cases like these is how identity facts *systematically* shape the contours of act-types. It is up to me whether I send a message by dropping a letter in the mailbox or sending an email. And if it’s not, it’s not because of something about me; maybe we’re out of paper or the internet is down, so my act is shaped by fortune. But whether I apologize by sincerely saying the words “I am very sorry,” or by doing this *and* repeating these words imploringly while exhibiting various submissive bodily postures is not either *up to me* or *up to fortune* in the same way. It is, rather, a function of my socioeconomic class, race, and/or gender, and so a matter of justice. Sometimes, the only route to successful apology for people of my social group is more winding, costly, and treacherous, than what lays before those who are dominantly situated. It is like always needing to light a fire by rubbing two sticks together while others can simply strike a match.

### **3. Two models as two sides of the same coin**

If this is right, previous discussion of the interaction between oppression and agency have oversimplified the mechanism through which unjust social environments twist our actions. In closing, I wish to complicate what I have presented as two distinct models, representing them instead as two sides of the same coin. Notice, first, that the two models can often be difficult to disambiguate. Cases in which complex action requires extremely demanding agential contributions often resemble cases of denied uptake. Imagine a woman who attempts to forgive but fails to meet the demanding and emotionally laborious standards for forgiveness in her society. She tries to forgive by saying the words “I forgive you” and resuming her usual interactions with the wrongdoer. But this is not enough; because she is treated as cold and insufficiently vulnerable, she is denied uptake and treated as not having forgiven. Seemingly paradoxically, she is treated as unable to forgive – but precisely because people like her are *especially* capable forgivers.

Cases like this make it tempting to pin down the precise content of ideology. Does sexism cast women as incompetent, or too competent? Does ableism cast disabled people as inefficacious, or as hyper-efficient? On a functionalist account of ideology, the propositional content of stereotypes like these are less significant than the fact that each of them can function



to systematically disadvantage women and people with disabilities.<sup>26</sup> So, oppressive ideology succeeds both by downgrading the agency of oppressed persons and by setting the standards too high. Furthermore, it may be ambiguous in any given case whether a person is unable to act because her agency is downgraded or inflated. Participating in oppressive social practices does not require anyone to draw on a settled set of propositions about the agency of the people they interact with – let alone a coherent one. A wide range of (even, contradictory) propositions can be wielded in diverse circumstances to reinforce the very same power structures.

This pushes us toward viewing the uptake denial model and the agential contribution model as continuous and fluid. While they are distinct mechanisms, they function together within the broader mechanism of oppression. I have tried to show that an overemphasis on the uptake denial model captures just one side of the issue. Our understanding of oppression and agency is deepened by attending to the ways in which our social practices can block our attempted actions *and* can shape them in unjustly onerous and demanding ways.

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<sup>26</sup> See Geuss 1981, 8 and Haslanger 2017, 3 on functionalist accounts of ideology. Shelby 2017 discusses this specifically in relation to agency attributions.

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