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UNIVERSALIZING ADAPTIVE PREFERENCES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Ethics and Public Policy

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Abstract

This honors thesis attempts to reconcile adaptive preferences (APs) with the autonomy of the oppressed. I thus investigate APs closely, a term used in the feminist philosophical literature to communicate a distinct feature of marginalized and oppressed people—the undue influence of systems of oppression on their preferences, decisions, and overall autonomy. I have aimed to situate this concept within a broader discussion of autonomy theory to get at the heart of this project: constructing an account that universalizes APs, one that asserts it as a phenomenon affecting people of all social locations. To better illustrate social positioning, I assert that all people are variously situated within any given dominant social imaginary; in this way, our agentic capacities are inherently tied to that social imaginary. My account thus puts forth necessary normative questioning to alleviate failures by theories to appropriately understand the oppressed person's actions, preferences, and even compliance with oppressive norms. Simultaneously challenging the current application of APs, while also acknowledging the concept's marked influence on the field of feminist ethics and autonomy theory, my account makes room for identities which shift, an intersectional perspective, a critique of the privileged who by way of their social locations often help maintain oppressive structures, and social resistance. The final portion of this project looks at competing accounts to answer a question of resistance and outlines specific examples of adaptive preferences held by the privileged person that one might learn to resist.

Introduction

Feminist theorists have long attempted to capture a distinct problem of the oppressed: the ways in which their preferences are formed (or deformed) by the oppressive structures around them. What to make, for example, of the woman that has become so accustomed to her oppressive conditions that she adapts to them, or even finds herself to prefer them? Such preferences present challenges to feminist theory and praxis that wish to abolish these oppressive structures. Some philosophers and feminists have taken up as a matter of philosophical concern potential consequence of even theorizing about adaptive preferences (APs)—does it undermine the oppressed person’s agency? Does it make women out to be brainwashed “dupes of patriarchy?” (Narayan 2002, 418).

I revise a definition of adaptive preferences by Serene Khader for this project—she proposes the term itself seems to suggest its problem: adaptive preferences “...are ‘adapted to’—in other words, ‘formed in reaction to’—social conditions” (Khader 2011, 74). In the philosophical literature, APs name something distinct about the oppressed experience and subjectivity, that sometimes the oppressive institutions that surround us do just that: they can corner us. However, I take issue with the way APs fail to account for the complex agentic capacities of the disadvantaged. Instead, what I propose is not a revocation of the concept, but an extension of it¹—because I do not take any claim that the oppressed person may adapt themselves under an oppressive condition to be synonymous with any claim of self-diminishing, or retreating, or hallowing. In fact, it may very well be the very opposite. What I do argue, then, is that all people—those inhabiting advantaged social locations, or disadvantaged social locations, or both—are shaped by their social environment in unique ways.

This idea that humans are intricately formed by the frameworks, relationships, political environments, and institutions that surround us is not a new one; in fact, it is widely accepted. Take, for example, the lyric from Broadway’s *Wicked: because I knew you, I have been changed for good*. This sort of statement is reflective of the dialogical nature of human life, by which “we become full agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, [by] acquisition of rich human languages of expression” (Taylor 1994, 32). Notions similar to those found in pop culture also pervade public consciousness. Consider renditions of the aphorism: *we become what we behold*. These observations show, in general, that people are sympathetic to the idea that who we are as individuals—including the decisions we make, preferences we hold, and thus, what we assume to be our autonomy—is formed, in part, by the social imaginary (Medina 2013, 67). It is the project of this paper to argue that our agentic capacities are inextricable from our dominant social imaginary, and further, to direct this claim toward normative questioning about the agency of the oppressed. The focal point of this paper is adaptive preferences. The goal of this project is to universalize APs in order to develop a framework for an acceptable understanding of the oppressed person’s functioning under, or compliance with, oppressive norms.

In §1, I define key terms, provide a survey of the philosophical literature on the relevant terms, and outline the general argument in favor of universalizing adaptive preferences. I bolster this argument by looking closely at the work of philosophers such as Serene Khader and Martha Nussbaum, and attempting to amend any potential shortcomings. I end section 1 by looking to one of Aesop’s fables and offering a reversal to further illustrate my argument in favor of

¹ This paper closely considers APs in the context of theory about oppression. For more about APs in the context of freedom and autonomy, see Jon Elster.

universalizing APs. In §2, I further explore the idea of APs as privilege maintenance, arguing for a conception of universal APs that understands the distinctions between those of the privileged and those of the oppressed. This is done most directly by connecting my account to Asha Bhandary's concept of *being at home*. I also argue for a 'wide' conception of the social imaginary by referencing the work of Moira Gatens and Charles Taylor. The result is a plurality, recognizing numerous social imaginaries rather than just one. In this way, it is not synonymous with ideology, but instead a distinct concept to map the way people *imagine* their social environment. My focus on the dominant social imaginary, however—one closely tied to the structure of institutions and from which those in privileged positions derive the most benefits—remains. This contributes to the larger goal in section 2 of drawing necessary distinctions between the adaptive preferences of the advantaged and disadvantaged. In §3, I look toward antiracist obligations by white people as I analyze competing accounts by José Medina and Shannon Sullivan. I offer an ameliorative conclusion by looking toward possibilities for resistance against APs by people in positions of privilege.

(1)

Adaptive Preferences and the Social Imaginary

I understand *social imaginary* as José Medina defines it: “the repository of images and scripts that become collectively shared” and that “constitutes the representational background against which people tend to share their thoughts and listen to each other in a culture” (Medina 2013, 67). Further, I see the social imaginary as a universal feature of human life—not in its effects, but in that it affects all humans. However, because I do not fully commit to answering questions such as, “Are there multiple social imaginaries?” and, if so, “How many?”, I instead focus on the dominant one. One could also plausibly use the term *stratified* to reflect its hierarchical nature. Section 2 defines the social imaginary with more detail. I define *adaptive preferences* as human preferences that are unconsciously informed by and shaped under the social imaginary. I reference concepts as being *universal* insofar as we might apply the concept inclusively, or to all humans regardless of social status. Because I understand the social imaginary as a universal phenomenon, I also understand adaptive preferences as a universal phenomenon.

Nussbaum, in *Women and Human Development*, asserts that “international political and economic thought should be feminist, attentive (among other things) to the special problems women face because of sex” (Nussbaum 2001, 4). Nussbaum asserts that the best approach to the “idea of a basic social minimum is provided by an approach that focuses on *human capabilities*, that is, what people are actually able to do and be” (Nussbaum 2001, 5). In order to pursue this enterprise, she first acknowledges that “...unequal social and political circumstances give women unequal human capabilities” (Nussbaum 2001, 1). I agree with many of the underlying assumptions of Nussbaum's project—especially that it is possible to “describe a framework for such a feminist practice of philosophy that is strongly universalist...” (Nussbaum 2001, 7); however, she fails to appreciate that adaptive preferences affect people across social status.

Nussbaum's chapter, “Adaptive Preferences and Women's Options,” begins with two epigraphs (Nussbaum 2001, 111):

To those with low self-regard, neglect does not seem unjust...
 —Rabindranath Tagore, “Letter from a Wife”

When we see women like us who have done something brave and new, then we get the confidence that we can learn something new too.

–Lila Datania, SEWA, Ahmedabad

Using these epigraphs as an introduction to her understanding of adaptive preferences—preferences that are deeply entrenched and often manipulated by tradition and intimidation—seems supportive of my general argument upon first inspection yet fails to represent the important foundational element of universality. I will examine Nussbaum’s presentation of adaptive preferences and Medina’s presentation of the social imaginary more closely, and then explain why Nussbaum’s failure to universalize the concept is detrimental to her project.

As imagined by Nussbaum, adaptive preferences developed by an agent are processual; they arise after “lifelong habituation” (Nussbaum 2001, 80). She offers the anecdote of a woman, like many women, who “seems to have thought [her] abuse was painful and bad, but still a part of women’s lot in life, just something women have to put up with as a part of being women dependent on men...” (Nussbaum 2001, 112). I think Nussbaum is right that we ought to take issue with this sort of preference, one that puts up with abuse; however, I think it is true that a parallel phenomenon can occur for the privileged person as well. This is not to say that adaptive preferences manifest equally between advantaged and disadvantaged groups²—rather it is to say that the dominant social imaginary is unavoidable. This contributes to part of the necessity I find in involving adaptive preferences with the social imaginary.

The “background against which people tend to share their thoughts and listen to each other in a culture” that defines Medina’s social imaginary is one that, I argue, mimics the structure of the prevailing, dominant institutions in a given society (2013, 67). Such a background thus has great bearing on the lifelong habituation Nussbaum references. How humans habituate or to what we become accustomed is necessarily married to that background, because it is the framework against which we come to understand ourselves and act as individuals. I do wish to make clear here that my argument is not to downplay the experience of oppressed groups (like women across the globe), but instead to strengthen the foundation of an argument which seeks to do the opposite—by both affording oppression the serious considerations it calls for and by avoiding undermining women’s autonomy.³

I acknowledge the hesitations one might have in understanding adaptive preferences as universal, occurring across status and identity: might it do the opposite of what we seek to do? Might it undermine the disadvantages of oppressed peoples, especially women? These are valid critiques to consider; and yet, one still can—and ought to—understand the necessity of such universalizing by looking at the fluidity of status. Advantages and disadvantages are not static. For example, it is plausible that one may lose a privileged status, or gain it, across their life; in the same way, oppression may diminish or emerge anew. Of course, some disadvantages and privileges may be static, inextricable from unchanging identities or statuses; but given that many statuses can in fact change, or may constantly be changing,⁴ it seems logical that preferences might change in tandem. If someone who was once economically privileged suddenly becomes economically disadvantaged, we may assume that person’s preferences—as directed towards economic and social policy, or even what one prefers to spend their money on—would adapt in

² It is important to note that the privileged person’s APs are not born out of oppression, but out of privilege.

³ For example, it seems to downplay women’s agentic capacities if one argues that women exhibit adaptive preferences and men do not (or, in other words, that women are adversely influenced by their social environment while men are not).

⁴ Such as age, social class, location, ability, or religion.

their own favor. In the same way Nussbaum conceptualizes it for oppressed people, privileged people's preferences may be also informed by tradition and in the interest of maintaining one's privilege.

Such universalizing also allows us to understand that a privileged person typically makes decisions and holds preferences which contribute to the maintenance of their privilege, and why these adaptive preferences can be harmful. Thus, understanding adaptive preferences as universal does *not* undermine the harms of oppression; instead, it acknowledges the social imaginary as a mechanism which often fosters epistemic vices in the privileged. José Medina identifies these vices in *The Epistemology of Resistance*: 1) epistemic arrogance, or a cognitive superiority complex; 2) epistemic laziness, or the “socially produced and carefully orchestrated lack of curiosity”; and 3) closed-mindedness, or an avoidance mechanism “systematically closed to certain phenomena, experiences, and perspectives” (Medina 2013, 33-34). He analyzes Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an example of the sexist and racist social imaginary prevalent through much of American history which perpetuated these vices in the privileged and nearly precluded meta-lucidity.⁵ The dominant social imaginary in the novel resulted in maintained social hierarchies and varying preferences based on how those hierarchies interacted with the various situations of people.

To revise Nussbaum's account, we must go further than simply saying “people's preference for basic liberties can itself be manipulated by tradition and intimidation,” (Nussbaum 2001, 115). Instead, we might say people's preferences may be also unconsciously informed by the hierarchies that reassure, encourage, and preserve one's liberties and status. In fact, because the dominant social imaginary mimics the structure of institutions and those that live in a given culture—specifically the dominant group—all must be thereafter beholden to it in some respect. We thus cannot reasonably sustain an argument that the dominant social imaginary affects some more than others, or some not at all; instead, we can see that it has an influence on the people living under it in unique, complex ways.⁶

As previously mentioned, the approach we ought to assume should entail taking issue with preferences that are clearly harmful so as to not underestimate the oppressed person's oppression; recall Nussbaum's anecdote of the woman who put up with marital abuse under the impression that it was simply her luck of the draw as a woman. To argue the social imaginary and adaptive preferences ought to be recognized as universal phenomena requires a discussion on whether or not adaptive preferences are harmful, and if so, when. This question is one that a number of philosophical accounts strive to answer. For the purposes of this paper, I will briefly outline elements of Serene Khader's account, then explain how it might necessarily be changed to include both advantaged and disadvantaged peoples.

Serene Khader shifts from the term *adaptive preferences* to *inappropriately adaptive preferences* (IAPs) to highlight the harm they cause; harm born from the fact that “because people have a tendency toward basic flourishing, IAPs are likely not their deep preference” (Khader 2011, 109). Khader's work omits thinking about the privileged person and APs where there is space to do so; advantaged people are therefore excluded from having adaptive preferences or inappropriately adaptive preferences on her account. While I value Khader's focus on how adaptive preferences are born out of social conditions (or as I imagine it, the social

⁵ An epistemic virtue, the “capacity to see the limitations of dominant ways of seeing” (Medina 2013, 47).

⁶ From this, it follows that the adaptive preferences born from a social imaginary have a similar nature—that each person's preferences are informed by the social imaginary in complex ways, no one person uniquely dodging its presence.

imaginary) and think it not to be entirely at conflict with my account, her failure to ascribe the concept to privileged people is a potential harm to the disadvantaged. Without getting caught up outlining Khader's account, I am compelled to revise her definition just as I would revise Nussbaum's. Because I understand the social imaginary and adaptive preferences as universal social phenomena, I also argue that Khader's understanding of adaptive preferences—"nonconductive to basic flourishing"—could be plausibly universalized, too (Khader 2001, 42). That is to say: if the disadvantaged person's preferences are nonconductive to their own flourishing, the privileged person's preferences also tend to be nonconductive to the disadvantaged person's flourishing.⁷ Along the same lines that Medina conceptualizes epistemic vices of the privileged, the privileged person's adaptive preferences tend to work in their own favor.⁸

Aesop's "The Fox and the Grapes" is widely referenced by scholars writing on adaptive preferences. In the fable, the fox, craving grapes but unable to reach them, decides they are sour. This moral asserts that people often alter their preferences based on what is attainable and what is not; this fact is influenced by the positioning of both the fox and of the goods at hand. The fable, in its original form, may be understood in the context of Nussbaum's anecdote where the fox may be likened to a woman, and the grapes may be likened to a marriage free from abuse. Because the woman, like the fox, is trapped with what she has, she simply assumes that her marital abuse is an acceptable, unchangeable part of a woman's fate. However, as I have iterated, the action of assigning such a fable only to the oppressed undermines their autonomy as agents even further.

A reversal of the fable shows how we might understand an advantaged person as having adaptive preferences, too, and further clarifies the ways adaptive preferences do not manifest equally from person to person. In such a reversal we might say the fox, knowing he is not a fan of grapes from previous encounters, yet having easy access to them, decides to eat them. In the original fable, it is clear the fox is being denied something that might contribute to his 'flourishing' and, in this way, the fox may be likened to a disadvantaged person. In the revised version, the fox is simply making the choice to consume something because it is readily available to him; not because he is forced to, but because it is simply an option. This fox, then, may be likened to an advantaged person. Both versions display the fox as a distinct agent, and both versions demonstrate adaptive preferences at work at a micro-level. However, as I have argued it, the effects between the advantaged fox and the disadvantaged fox are unequal despite their both experiencing adaptive preferences in a similar context. In presenting two versions, I characterize both foxes at an agentive base-level in parsing how APs are uniquely at work for both. Thus, by my account, the disadvantaged fox gains some level of equality with the advantaged fox. While we still ought to recognize the differences that come from the foxes having to make distinct choices in distinct situations, we have first done the important work of

⁷ I wish to emphasize this point and be clear it is not a claim that the oppressor is also harmed by oppression, which is a position many philosophers do take up. Also, I will not be switching back and forth between IAPs and APs, but I acknowledge the usefulness of Khader's distinction and take its underlying argument to be true.

⁸ However, the adaptive preferences of the oppressed person may be more of an attempt to make the best of the situation in which they live (See Uma Narayan's *bargaining with patriarchy* (2002)). To make the distinction about who is being harmed as a result of an adaptive preference is to articulate the stratification of adaptive preferences under the social imaginary, while still accepting both terms allows room for the concept to be necessarily universal.⁸

ascribing some level of equality to one's capacities to exercise agency,⁹ and therefore, their identities as agents.

(2)

The Social Imaginary and Being at Home

In section 1, I created the space to think about adaptive preferences as privilege maintenance; this section explores the idea further. To make this argument, I look closely again at the dominant social imaginary as well as Asha Bhandary's concept of being at home in the world (Bhandary 2020, 180). It is the project of this section to present a nuanced account of the social imaginary to assert the universal and hierarchical nature of adaptive preferences. It is in this way that I continue to draw important distinctions between the adaptive preferences of the advantaged and disadvantaged.

I draw heavily from Bhandary's *being at home*, which she describes as the "state of affairs achieved through the dynamic interaction of a person with their social environment and intimate others. It is influenced by the ease with which a person can access a range of primary goods. It also includes our cherished relationships" (Bhandary 2020, 180). Because being at home relies, in part, on a level of intelligibility "from a particular kind of relation between the person and culture," those who occupy privileged locations in the dominant social imaginary tend to experience being at home (Bhandary 2020, 180-81). It follows that these are also the people "with the most to lose from changes to their social form that bring about justice..." (Bhandary 2020, 183). Thus, the privileged person typically exhibits adaptive preferences which ensure the preservation of the occupied position. Questions remain regarding whether or not all preferences are adaptive.¹⁰ I do not fully commit to answering this question here but offer insights which may help one's thinking about it.

I will further develop my account of the social imaginary by referencing work by Moira Gatens and Charles Taylor to argue for a 'wide' conception: not *a* social imaginary, but numerous social imaginaries, so that it is not synonymous with ideology but instead a distinct concept to map the way people *imagine* their social environment. Still, my focus on the *dominant* social imaginary—one closely tied to the structure of institutions and from which those in privileged positions derive the most benefits—is a way in which I am able to draw necessary distinctions between the adaptive preferences of the advantaged and disadvantaged. Especially salient from Chela Sandoval's work is her *differential consciousness*, or the subject position that allows one to function "within, yet beyond, the demands of dominant ideology" (Sandoval 2000, 43). Key terms defined in the previous chapter remain relevant here.

Bhandary outlines *being at home* in order to deploy a "typology of men in patriarchy" (Bhandary 2020, 180). She notes the phenomenon is brought about through "the dynamic interaction of a person with their social environment" but, for the purposes of this project, I revise this definition to replace "social environment" with Medina's social imaginary. Bhandary asserts that culture determines the "social significance of actions and ways of life, and thereby

⁹ I do not wish to make a claim about equality of people's capacities to exercise autonomy, as I think these capacities are more complex than can be fully explained here. However, the role my reversal of Aesop's fable plays is still important because it, at the very least, unearths the role APs play in the decisions and preferences of both advantaged and disadvantaged people.

¹⁰ While the dominant social imaginary could have an overarching effect on a person's whole self, I later discuss ways people may resist the dominant social imaginary.

mediates between individual persons and the bare bones of the distributive [care] arrangement” (Bhandary 2020, 180). Because the social imaginary is the “repository of images and scripts that become collectively shared,” (Medina 2013, 67) and against which we communicate and are connected in a culture, it is necessarily tied up in the conversation on intelligibility and *being at home*. In addition, Bhandary notes that one does not need a static culture to experience this state of affairs. This idea is supported by my claim that identities and cultural investments can change and thus preferences adapt. Instead, one needs some “valued relationships with others and a level of intelligibility...” (Bhandary 2020, 180-81). As a social imaginary is what connects people in a given culture, intelligibility depends especially on the dominant social imaginary. It follows that because people are variously situated within the dominant social imaginary, there is a stratification of intelligibility and of *being at home*. These stratifications bolster my claim that the privileged person typically makes decisions and holds preferences that maintain their privilege.

According to her account of intelligibility, Bhandary argues that “everyone in a social form has a basic investment in that social form” (Bhandary 2020, 185). This includes women in patriarchal societies. Rather than borrow from Raz’s account of the social form, as Bhandary does, I replace the term once again with social imaginary. Bhandary uses social form to summarize the “context in which people live, including both institutional arrangements and culture” (Bhandary 2020, 185). Medina clarifies the social imagination’s interaction with epistemic sensibilities to ultimately argue that the imagination can be utilized in a way to “make people stronger and able to resist” (Medina 2013, 252). This is consistent with the work of Moira Gatens, from whom Medina borrows. Gatens argues that social imaginaries ‘link up’ to “display disconcertingly similar patterns” (Gatens 1995, xi). The result, however, is not necessarily a cohesive and intelligible whole; instead, the differing sociabilities “jostle against each other,” creating and illuminating paradoxes, and presenting “opportunities for change and political action” (Gatens 1995, xi). Gatens’ work is important in the room it makes for the privileged person committed to resisting the epistemic vices I outlined in chapter one.

For an account which depends so heavily on a concept of a symbolic social dimension of the world, there must be an elaboration on its scope. Here, I take on Gatens’ approach to use ‘imaginary’ in an open yet “technical sense,” in order to reference the images, tropes, symbols, scripts, and other representations “which help construct various forms of subjectivity” (Gatens 1995, viii). Here I ought to iterate that, while adhering to a plural account in which there are numerous social imaginaries, I still focus my attention on the dominant imaginary to illustrate the variously positioned subjectivities formed within it. Charles Taylor argues that what makes the social imaginary interesting is its being “shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society” (Taylor 2002, 106). Taylor’s emphasis on imagining (and focus on the dominant) help make clear why the social imaginary is preferable as a term. Medina also illustrates this point when referencing Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The epistemic vices (or the *resistance to know*) that the famous novel’s jury demonstrate come “from *the social imaginary*.” In this context (1930’s Alabama), the dominant social imaginary circulated racist images, scripts, and tropes, thus producing active ignorance. Those most likely to be influenced by that social imaginary were those “raised under the influence of these imaginations and the cultural representations they produced” and, as I argue, those with the greatest investments in that

dominant social imaginary (Medina 2013, 68). This section of Medina’s book is particularly relevant to the plural account in that it emphasizes *one* dominant social imaginary.¹¹

Bhandary notes that Raz’s account of social forms ultimately “underestimates the prevalence of innovation, dissent and resistance” (2020, 187) within them while this is a front, I argue, on which Medina is successful. So, while I argue that the person inhabiting privileged locations in the social imaginary is more likely to adapt their preferences toward those which maintain their privilege, there is not hope lost for resistance. As iterated in section one, moving towards meta-lucidity to fulfill epistemic obligations requires improving both self-knowledge and knowledge of others, and within my account, the social imaginary is a place in which to do both.

In order to illustrate the concept of cultural investments and stakes, and being at home, Bhandary references Ahmadi Lewin’s study of Iranian immigrants in Sweden. Lewin’s work on identity crises and integration shows that Iranian women adjust to Western societies with more ease than Iranian men. This is reflective of the notion that those in privileged locations within the social imaginary have greater investments within their culture, and thus, more to lose. For Iranian women, leaving one’s culture still involves abandoning investments in that culture, yet they are more likely to overcome identity crises in their new environment. The identity crisis is spurred from a loss of inner integrity as a result of “a discrepancy between the dominant culture and the culture internalized in the individual,” and the individual’s failure to identify with the “social groups or classes in the new society” (Lewin 2001, 123). Bhandary transitions to imagining a social form change in the United States—one where men are expected to “discern the care needs of others” (Bhandary 2020, 191). Such changes she notes as unavoidably disorienting, but for those in the disadvantaged position, there is more to gain. I find it significant to note that having more to gain from changes in the dominant social imaginary ought not be equated with a lack of cultural investments—Bhandary avoids making this mistake when she notes earlier in the chapter that all have some basic investment in their cultures. Serene Khader’s *kinship harms* is especially reflective of this notion.

Khader identifies the weakening of existing kinship forms as a type of harm through “imperialist associational damage” (Khader 2019, 55). For women, changes in kinship structures can injure their wellbeing. This is one example of the loss Iranian women in Lewin’s study may have faced after immigrating to Sweden; yet, compared to their new access to primary goods, work status, and thus social position, their transition was completed with more ease than the men. The social imaginary may be used to complicate the way we understand the disoriented person, the woman faced with changes to her kinship structure. While the woman may be better off than the man as a result of her new-and-improved access to primary goods, the harms she faces as a loss of kinship and previous investments has to do with the imagination. To better understand the disorientation experienced by those who face major changes in the social imaginary, the concept itself needs to be able to illustrate the various situations people occupy within it.

Taylor argues for an understanding of the social imaginary that is broader, extending “beyond the immediate background understanding that makes sense of our particular practices” and including the relationships one has with others, how one got to where they are, and how one relates to others (Taylor 2002, 107). The limits of this wide conception are unclear, unstructured,

¹¹ I am still inclined to believe that social imaginaries separate from yet like the dominant are multiple—but the fact of a dominant social imaginary does not preclude the possibility of a social imaginary, somewhere, dedicated to antiracism.

and inarticulate. Taylor openly admits these things, arguing it is within that understanding where “particular features of our world become evident” (Taylor 2002, 107). Taylor uses the example of organizing a demonstration. If one pursues organizing a demonstration, the act itself is already in the actor’s repertoire. The ritual and social norms are understood (assembling, picking up banners, marching), and the “background understanding” is what makes the act possible; yet, “part of what makes sense of it is the picture of ourselves as speaking to others to whom we are related in a certain way...” (Taylor 2002, 108). I argue that the idea Taylor is propelling—a dynamic between practices and one’s relationships with those around them—is key because it includes the component of imagining. This imagining, or the ability to see oneself performing some action, is contingent on Taylor’s wide view, as defined above. Taylor concludes that “we can see here how the understanding of what we’re doing right now (without which we couldn’t be doing this action) makes the sense it does because of our grasp on the wider predicament: how we stand in relation to others and to power,” alongside time and space (Taylor 2002, 109).

Taylor’s widened view helps us understand and do the important work of differentiating between the adaptive preferences of both advantaged and disadvantaged peoples. On this view, an argument may go like this: if, by way of her location in the dominant social imaginary, a woman is unable to *imagine* herself performing some action based on a broad interpretation of power structures and her relationships with others, it is within those boundaries that she is likely to act and develop preferences. The privileged person, having easy access to a range of primary goods, experiencing *being at home* in the world, will have much less difficulty imagining himself in a number of preferable scenarios. This logic also illustrates why changes to the social imaginary are so disorienting for the privileged person; not only has he lost access to goods to which he is accustomed, but he has never before—through the collective tropes, images, and symbols provided by the dominant social imaginary—been forced to *imagine* himself in such a scenario. It is precisely in this way the privileged person’s preferences and actions tend to be adapted toward privilege maintenance. Using the same lens, the Iranian woman who has immigrated to Sweden may also be better understood. The disorientation she experiences as a result of changes to her kinship structure is reflected by the idea within the wide view that her ability to understand herself in relation to others and power structures has also been altered. Thus, the wide view opens up ways to analyze both the advantaged and disadvantaged person, while necessary drawing distinctions between them.

Chela Sandoval’s work on the methodology of the oppressed can be joined with Taylor’s wider social imaginary view in order to characterize women within patriarchal societies as agentive, even performing resistance. Her concept of differential oppositional consciousness, otherwise known as *mobile subjectivity*, references the subject’s ability to interpret power dynamics in differing scenarios and then tactically commit to different identities best suited to push back against those dynamics. This ability to interpret power dynamics is included in Taylor’s wide view. Borrowing from Anzaldúa who writes on the “weaving ‘between and among’ oppositional ideologies,” Sandoval identifies such a mode of consciousness as the ‘differential’ (Sandoval 2000, 57). This mode, she says, “functions like the clutch of an automobile, the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power (Sandoval 2000, 57). In this way, and made clear through Sandoval’s language, the differential “depends on a form of agency that is self-consciously mobilized in order to enlist and secure influence” (Sandoval 2000, 57). This example, where the subject is an agent with the permission to “select, engage, and disengage,” is relevant here specifically for its ability to characterize women or otherwise disadvantaged peoples as agentive

(Sandoval 2000, 57). Uma Narayan's concept of *bargaining with patriarchy* simultaneously reflects Sandoval's mobile subjectivity insofar as they both understand woman as "avail[ing] themselves of whatever room they have to maneuver" (Narayan 2002, 422). The use of maneuvering in Narayan's account is complicated by Sandoval's argument that women learn which identity best suits them in a given situation. Thus, some women¹² in patriarchal societies adapt their preferences in various circumstances, amplified by the dominant social imaginary, yet do so out of their agentic capacities, against the wide view Taylor developed.

Because Taylor's view includes knowledge of things like the relationships one has with others, how one got to where they are, and how one relates to others, the social imaginary (dominant or otherwise) includes space for the mobile subjectivity of the oppressed—and even resistance by the privileged as outlined by Medina. This knowledge comes about, in part, by way of the experience (or lack thereof) of concepts described earlier, like intelligibility and being at home in the world. Part of the process of moving towards meta-lucidity and learning to see past the dominant ways of seeing requires improving both self-knowledge and knowledge of others—my account functions as a sort of meta-space where the privileged, who have stronger obligations to meet but often fail to meet them, might be able to see multiple groups (themselves and different others) up against the same social imaginary (Medina 2013, 187). Then, work towards developing knowledge of the self and others in fulfilling epistemic obligations may occur. To deny adaptive preferences are universal is to refuse the oppressed some equal footing they might possibly have with the privileged while a great amount of equality is already precluded through their oppression. It is to say to them: *your equal status depends solely on something you cannot control*. Furthermore, for the privileged person to say to the oppressed person, *I understand the decisions you make are informed by a detailed complex of social investments and contexts born from the dominant social imaginary, and that they are nonetheless agentic decisions*, is meaningful, but is so much more so when he *also* acknowledges his own decisions are also informed by the dominant social imaginary—and that what they share in common is not necessarily what they face under that social imaginary, but the ability to adapt their preferences and decisions to suit themselves within it. It is precisely this sort of thinking which leads to a framework dedicated to avoiding women's or any disadvantaged person's agencies being undermined.

(3)

What Are White People to Do?

I wish to conclude this project on a promising note. I have set out here to sketch an outline to better understand the agency of differently-situated people in an unequal world, and that there are moral obligations some people thus have as a result. These obligations, though, with the help of my account, imply something I find hopeful: that there is room for resistance. I take this to be one of the great projects of feminist and antiracist philosophy—asking (and aiming to answer) what people in positions of privilege can do to resist and help eradicate injustice and oppression. In this section, I look toward this question as a white woman, and examine competing accounts in order to better explicate the place of the social imaginary and APs as spaces for resistance. As Shannon Sullivan indicates in her introduction to *Good White People*, the question is complicated—even asking it assumes white people *can* do something, which some

¹² I wish to clarify that I say "some women" rather than "all women" intentionally and because of considerations of intersectionality. There are clear differences in adaptation between different women.

would disagree with. To that end, this paper will analyze two differing accounts which attempt to address this question—that of Shannon Sullivan and that of José Medina—to get clear on what sort of prescription for white people is the most fruitful.¹³ In adopting Medina’s prescriptions, I will continue to highlight APs to argue for the ways white people can resist one specific realm of the self that tends to perpetuate asymmetrical social standings.¹⁴

I want to briefly acknowledge the scope of this section. Political philosophers have argued a myriad of ways white people can do their part to resist and diminish racial injustice. Here, however, I only wish to explicate how white people can specifically resist their own adaptive preferences which uphold and reinforce asymmetrical social standings; in other words, this section is not a catch-all. White people have a lifetime of learning and unlearning to foster antiracist sensibilities in as many spheres of the world and self as possible. To me, the concept of APs is an acceptable place to start because of the way it situates the problem at the individual level yet reveals its effects at the institutional level. This is to say that those occupying privileged positions in the world tend to reap the benefits of a society that favors them and disfavors different others. Thus, the preferences of the privileged person tend to reflect and serve their own privilege-maintaining purposes. I also think conceptualizing asymmetrical social relations in this way is beneficial for how it illuminates some injustices that may be difficult to see otherwise (and this, too, is a great project of antiracist philosophy) for preferences are often harbored privately.

Medina argues for the ways in which the social imagination can be utilized to “make people stronger and able to resist” (Medina 2013, 252). He acknowledges that the imagination can “sensitize or desensitize people,” that it can “make people feel close or distant to others—and even to aspects of themselves,” and “create or sever social bonds, affective ties, and relations of empathy or antipathy, solidarity or lack of solidarity” (Medina 2013, 252). But, Medina asserts, there are still *resistant* ways of imagining that “can contest exclusions and stigmatizations” (Medina 2013, 252). This is because the imagination is an “exercise,” one which includes taking up perspectives, inhabiting spaces, and relating to others—in ways that link to our actual world. To Medina, it is in this way we can establish “a bridge between our world and other possible ones” and, I would argue, make the cognitive room for other possible worlds, even before such a bridge (2013, 255).

Imagining is also double-sided. Medina borrows from Tamar Szabó Gendler (2000), asserting that regardless of how realistic or unrealistic fiction may be, “there are always *some* relations between the fictional worlds we imagine and our actual worlds” (Medina 2013, 255). In other words, there are things we can *export* from our real world into our fictional world, and things we can *import* from the fictional world into our real world. Medina likens this idea to a bridge again where the traffic can be problematic in both directions: “we may not want to import things from the fictional scenario into our world...and, on the other hand, we may also not want to establish an imaginary world by exporting alleged phenomena and relations that we do not accept as existing in our world” like, in the case of this paper, racial injustice (Medina 2013, 255). Just as Medina argues throughout his book for the imperative of epistemic interaction, the imagination can be engaged in ways that procure epistemic counterpoints and thus “a venue for

¹³ “Fruitful” may be taken a number of ways, but here I specifically mean reasonable and actionable given the nature of racism as an injustice affecting real, physical people who interact with real, physical others in a real, physical world.

¹⁴ Including APs in such an analysis also bolsters my claim that Medina’s prescriptions may be more fruitful than Sullivan’s because his account can adequately address them while Sullivan’s cannot.

moral and political learning” (Medina 2013, 256). In other words, people in positions of privilege have an obligation to assess the boundaries of our imaginations, “interrogate the limits of our imagination and identify where imaginative resistance lie so as to become able to control it, instead of being controlled by it” (Medina 2013, 256). One of the ways to do this is by making room for new perspectives by having *meaningful engagements* with *different others*. Comparing and contrasting imaginative resistances lends itself to developing sensitivity to other ways of imagining and inhabiting worlds as well an increased self-awareness of the ways oneself inhabits the world. I want to clarify here that this methodology is not perfect—there are explicit racists and white supremacists who would *not* develop a sensitivity to different others by engaging with them. I argue—and it is likely Medina would, too—that the groups most productive to focus on here are those who may contribute to racial injustice (especially through APs), but unintentionally. Sullivan’s language of the *good white liberal* may be useful for getting at the type of group I wish to reference here. Identifying the limits of one’s imagination and capacities for resistance also allows one to get clear about one’s social positioning in relation to others, and thus understand the ways one’s preferences may be formed in reaction to the dominant repository of images, scripts, and tropes that circulates in any given society.

Medina differentiates between two senses of epistemic imaginative resistance: 1) at the object-level, with respect to the content of what he calls *hot counterfactuals*, or imaginings where our affective moral and political commitments are engaged (such as an idea “that a black woman would behave in a particular way”); and 2) at the meta-level, where we can exercise resistance to a way of imagining that “targets a whole perspective or frame—for example, looking in the world through the lenses of white supremacy ideology” (Medina 2013, 257). On my view, part of why these possibilities for resistance make sense is because they make space for scrutinizing the self. Medina develops an account where privileged people, those who “have more or stronger epistemic obligations given the epistemic advantages they enjoy” but often fail to meet these obligations, can learn what work is necessary for moving towards *meta-lucidity*—seeing past the dominant ways of seeing (Medina 2013, 187). In doing so, the room made for increasing knowledge of the self and others is also room made for coming to understand one’s preferences in the context of the social world. Medina’s move from *imaginative resistance* to *resistant imaginations* marks the difference between isolated reactions and a more structural phenomenon, something that “requires social support and practices of interaction” (Medina 2013, 257). These terms make clear what it takes for white people to live up to their obligations under oppression, to utilize their imaginations as resistance to APs that sustain asymmetrical social standings, but the answer is not so simple; yes, it requires an understanding of oneself and others, which is made possible by having meaningful, sustained interactions with different others, but to Medina, it also requires that our imagination becomes pluralized, polyphonic, and experimentalist. For the purposes of this paper, I will not be including instructions offered by Medina for attaining these features, but will agree that they are necessary and appropriate for an actionable account outlining white people’s epistemic obligations.

I will now look to Shannon Sullivan on the matter of what white people ought to do in the name of antiracist efforts to bolster the claims for resistance I have vied for thus far. Shannon Sullivan has, in the introduction to her book, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism*,¹⁵ explored the sly realities of racism in America, as well as put forth a

¹⁵ While not directly related to the project of this paper, I would like to acknowledge the salience of language in Sullivan’s book: the idea of the “good white liberal” gets at something culturally relevant and important, which a number of other terms in modern discourse (especially on social media) broach as well. Some terms that come to

call-to-action: white self-love. Sullivan argues that love is an affect “that binds a person to that which she loves” (2014, 9). So, for the white person who has self-love, they may circumvent the *distancing*¹⁶ that white people tend to have towards their whiteness. Sullivan says, “I will argue that rather than try to create distance between themselves and their racial identity, white people need a closer, more intimate relationship with it if they are going to be effective in racial justice movements” (9). Sullivan also argues that love can require a sort of criticism, that it can often be discontent, and thus that a white person’s loving themselves as a white person “means critically...caring enough about the effects whiteness has in the world to work to make it something different and better...” (2014, 10). While Sullivan gets at something key here, I am inclined to note what might be lost in looking strictly at the white subjectivity.

Medina simultaneously analyzes the possibilities of the oppressed person’s subjectivities and perspectives side-by-side with those of the privileged person’s; this is significant because the methodology avoids the problem of looking only at those perpetuating injustice to determine how we might ameliorate it. Sullivan even addresses the issue that might arise otherwise: “if part of the problem of white privilege is that white people always see themselves as the rightful center of attention, then focusing on white people would only seem to perpetuate, rather than challenge white privilege” (2014, 17). I argue that the problem may not be focusing on white privilege in *general*, but on focusing on the perspectives and points of view of white people while attempting to *address* the injustices born out of white privilege. This is one of the core issues Medina confronts in his book, for it is unfair to determine how white people can perform resistance to oppression by their *own* standards—people in positions of privilege typically don’t have to expand their knowledge to include others around them in the way that the oppressed do.¹⁷

Even as Sullivan defends a conception of white self-love that can experience discontentment, that can see the systemic harms procured by whiteness, she fails to acknowledge the situations and subjectivities of non-white people, which seems essential to any criticism on white racism and prospects for developing knowledge of different others. Where Sullivan says one way for white people to resist ontological expansiveness¹⁸ is “for them to stay home, so to speak, rather than travel to other racial locations” (2014, 20), Medina says white people need a “*transformative but not shattering lucidity*,” one that allows subjects to “see how their whiteness has been constructed socially and historically vis-à-vis other identities” and at the same time that “points in the direction of *new ways of inhabiting that identity*” (2013, 220). He outlines how to move towards a kaleidoscopic consciousness for genuine open-mindedness, a consciousness that “remains forever open to being expanded” (2013, 224). It seems, by Sullivan’s account, white people can garner self-knowledge and scrutinize whiteness in isolation, by way of “stay[ing] home,”¹⁹ (2014, 20).

mind include: being ‘woke,’ being a ‘social justice warrior’ (SJW), and being ‘politically correct’ (PC; people may be referenced as the ‘PC police’). The project at hand, to break down this guise and reveal truths about the “‘good’ white people whose goodness is marked by their difference from the ‘bad’ white people who are considered responsible for any lingering racism in a progressive society,” is a necessary and long-overdue one (2014, 3).

¹⁶ This distancing may be likened to Medina’s concept of active ignorance, born out of epistemic vices: epistemic arrogance, epistemic laziness, and closed-mindedness.

¹⁷ Recall the concept of meta-lucidity.

¹⁸ Defined by Sullivan as “the habit, often unconscious, of assuming and acting as if any and all spaces—geographical, psychological, cultural, linguistic, or whatever—are rightfully available to and open for white people to enter whenever they like” (2014, 20).

¹⁹ I assume this is metaphorical rather than literal.

I acknowledge the potential concern—one Sullivan presents—for only propagating ontological expansiveness with a prescription, like Medina’s, of sustained interaction with others. My response is that this is different from ontological expansiveness in that the expanse being unfurled is one that engages and makes room for *new* perspectives, not the perspective of the white self. It may still be a concern that white people only exploit the resources and social labor of people of color when they “travel to other racial locations” to learn about the harmful effects of whiteness (Sullivan 2014, 20). Sullivan argues this is a symptom of ontological expansiveness that must be resisted, and that one way to do so is to stay home. Still, it is unclear to me that Sullivan’s following claim, that whiteness alone can be “a legitimate social location or identity from which to challenge white racism” totally solves the problem (2014, 21). It is true that failing to acknowledge one’s subject position and privilege as a white person is a failing in the methodology of resisting white racism—and so, in this way, whiteness is a legitimate location as Sullivan indicates. However, without a proper understanding of oneself *and* oneself in relation to different others, as well as the perspectives of those others, it seems unlikely that the white person can adequately and appropriately do the work of critically examining whiteness. In fact, in a culture still so fraught with racial inequalities, white people cannot even fully understand and deconstruct their preferences (and how they may be adaptively formed) without a broader understanding of these social relations. It may seem, at first, that Sullivan’s calls to action are franker and more forthright, but I would argue Medina is promoting epistemic obligations that require more from white people. In other words, staying at home²⁰ doesn’t seem to be in his repertoire for resisting white privilege and epistemic injustice, because we must, instead, establish “relations of solidarity that bring together individuals into well-communicated social networks and social movements” and do the work of getting clear about our relations with others if we are to resist the injustices born out of them.

Some might argue that the differences I pose between Medina’s and Sullivan’s accounts boil down to a dispute about integration versus separatism; however, what I am doing here is not making a strict recommendation for either. I think there are scenarios in which interaction between people is unnecessary and harmful, and scenarios in which interaction between people is necessary and good. Instead, what I have attempted in this paper is zeroing in on one facet of whiteness: the adaptive preferences born out of one’s white location in the world, formed in reaction to oppressive norms that favor whiteness. As I offered earlier, this is just one part of the self that white people must focus on during a lifetime of antiracist obligations. Medina’s account of the resistant imagination necessarily requires that white people do more than simply figure out what whiteness means on their own; instead, they must actively be in the world interacting with different others to truly learn about themselves.

The active work encouraged by Medina’s account lends itself to concrete examples of adaptive preferences that privileged people may learn to resist. I recently shared a conversation with one of my good friends, whom I worked and developed a relationship with through a student organization in college; she has since graduated and moved to New York City where she works. Her relationship to feminism and social justice has blossomed over the past year, so much so that she began to seriously study feminist literature and critical race theory for the first time, all of her own volition.²¹ Several of our conversations over the course of this year have been

²⁰ As prescribed by Sullivan.

²¹ I take this volition to be a genuine feat; I believe it is easier to remain socially aware when one is in an institutional environment, such as academia (which has been my driving force in learning and becoming passionate

about her experience with Greek life; this friend was in a sorority throughout college and her recent dedication to social justice has encouraged critical thought about the inequities within the system of sororities and fraternities at primarily white institutions. I prodded at her newfound criticism and questioned why she was not critical of the system while she was immediately benefitting from it. Because she was raised in a privileged, conservative Midwest home, college was not a place where she was forced to reckon with injustice. In fact, it's fair to say her college experience was probably similar to mine: I have emotionally and financially supportive parents; I'm white, cisgender, able-bodied. As this friend and I spoke, she said, "I was in a sorority because I had to be—to get where I am today." This sort of language helps reveal the nature of the privileged person's APs. They are preferences that further power and privilege in some way (for this friend, her sorority experience made possible a connection at an internship in New York immediately following graduation), but often at the expense of other, marginalized people. What I draw from this example, and what I think is quite hopeful, is the method by which this friend came to a sort of meta-lucidity: by meeting (and even living with) different others in a new environment; by reading vigorously; by being eager to learn from the people she meets.

There may be an argument made for intersectionality, too: there is no perfect quantification method for when a preference is wrong or right, when its benefits outweigh its harms. It is also fair, while we note the racial inequities perpetuated by Greek life, to simultaneously note the ways in which sororities can open doors for women entering fields disproportionately represented by men. There are instances in my life, as a privileged white woman, too, where I realize preferences I hold are perhaps a result of my status. Take buying clothing, for example, from companies I know do not require ethical working conditions—because I have the means to, and because I believe my fashion taste is some specific way requiring some specific purchases. Or, for example, not being adamant about tipping 20 percent, at the very least, at restaurants to overworked, underpaid workers. After working in the service industry, I've become intentional about resisting this sort of failure. Such change was a matter of being in the world and learning about power through experience. Medina's methodology for epistemic imaginative resistance can be applied to these examples, too, if the privileged agent at hand employs resistance via the imagination at the object-level (resisting some stereotype about service work, for example) or the meta-level (expanding, or abandoning, one's college/Greek life worldview to see the world through new lenses and in new spaces)—both levels engineered, in part, by the dominant social imaginary one finds oneself amidst.

My argument as a whole is a way of understanding these complexities of social positionality under the dominant social imaginary and its consequences. As Medina argues, our view ought to be "sensitive to context and to social positionality, one that rejects any one-size-fits-all approach, and one that argues... [assessments] have to be done piecemeal, case by case, and not by applying the same analysis to all agents equally" (2013, 119). Such an approach encourages an understanding that adaptive preferences can be either harmful or beneficial, or both, but also that they tend to reflect the disproportionate harms oppressed groups face. Thus, the relevant call-to-action remains: the privileged, who "have more or stronger epistemic obligations given the epistemic advantages they enjoy," should be able to better question the complexities of action and choice on my account (Medina 2013, 187). Doing this work, learning about one's privilege and APs under the dominant social imaginary, is not brave or heroic. In Medina's words, these are obligations. Note my use of *learn*; it is key here. Though reading is

about social justice), that supports or requires such education, learning, and reading. To do so once one is out in the world on their own requires a level of discipline and sincerity.

one part of self-education I find valuable, I do not believe the most effective way to learn of (and unlearn) one's racist preferences is by simply reading the prescriptions or examples laid out here. They rely on a greater obligation to go out in the world and actively gain understanding about one's community, one's relationship to privilege and power, and that relationship in comparison to others'—only then can one know one has, in good faith, understood the ways their actions, preferences, and desires may uphold injustice—then actively resist them.

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