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ARTICLE

Patriarchal Bargains as Oppressive Double Binds

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Abstract

In this paper, I define patriarchal bargains as a subset of oppressive double binds. They are situations in which an agent, under conditions of gender oppression, intentionally chooses the prudentially best option—complying with an oppressive norm—over the morally best option—resisting the norm—even though both options are "inextricably bound up" (Hirji 2021, 645). I then explore two frameworks to examine the bargainer's responsibility for choosing the prudentially best option: forward-looking political responsibility (Young 2011) and backward-looking moral responsibility (Sangiovanni 2018). Forward-looking political responsibility shows some conceptual limitations in justifying why the bargainer is neither blameworthy nor liable for choosing the prudentially best option when she is aware of the implications of her choice and does not face unreasonable costs in forgoing the bargain. However, backward-looking moral responsibility faces two practical concerns: first, it risks diverting attention from the oppressive structures that constrain the bargainer's moral agency; and second, it may be divisive and isolating by promoting negative emotions such as guilt and shame, which could discourage people from participating in collective struggles for social change.

1. Introduction

In feminist philosophy, much attention has been given to women's compliance with oppressive gender norms. However, patriarchal bargains (PBs) are a relatively underexplored phenomenon within this domain. Various theorists have used the concept of PBs to demonstrate that compliance can sometimes be a strategy for coping with oppression, rather than a form of mere acquiescence to it. For example, Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) conceptualizes PBs as self-interested negotiations women undertake within oppressive systems to optimize limited life options. Through these bargains, women may trade compliance with norms of submissiveness for benefits such as protection, stability, or social respect (Kandyoti 1988). Similarly, Uma Narayan (2002, 422) describes PBs in terms of a "bundle of elements" associated with cultural practices in contexts of

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oppression. In these bundles, women may value some elements—such as their community's approval—while rejecting others, such as conforming to traditional gender roles. When women lack the power to "undo these bundles," compliance becomes a strategic choice to secure the goods they prioritize (Narayan 2002, 422). Serene Khader (2018) further develops this idea with her notion of flourishing trade-offs, where women under circumstances of oppression and deprivation prioritize flourishing in one domain over another or temporarily compromise some aspect of their well-being to achieve what they consider other higher-order ends.

Yet, PBs are rarely studied as a normatively significant way of engaging with gender norms in its own right, especially in the context of broader debates on feminist collective struggles for structural change.[1] This oversight is surprising, given that PBs arguably represent one of the most common forms of compliance with gender norms in communities where these norms, though increasingly contested or straightforwardly rejected, continue to exert significant influence. As such, PBs deserve closer examination and deeper understanding. This paper seeks to address this gap by pursuing two overarching objectives:

I. To refine the concept of PBs and clarify the conditions under which they can serve as justified coping mechanisms for oppression, in relation to either forward-looking political responsibility or backward-looking moral responsibility to resist structural injustice.[2]
II. To show how PBs can also inform discussions about how to conceptualize responsibility for structural injustice, particularly concerning the issue of how women—and more broadly, members of oppressed groups—are often blamed for being complicit with the systems that oppress them.

In section 2, I define PBs as a specific subset of oppressive double binds, adopting Hirji's definition of double binds (Hirji 2021). PBs are choice situations under conditions of gender oppression where an agent *intentionally* chooses the prudentially best option—complying with an oppressive norm—over the morally best option—resisting the norm, even though both options are "inextricably bound up" (Hirji 2021, 645).[3] This means that, either way, the agent will be complicit in oppression to some extent. However, bargaining typically entails a more significant form of complicity compared to openly resisting, and may also include cases in which the bargainer is knowingly complicit, rather than only accidentally so.[4]

In section 3, I examine two ways of understanding and evaluating the bargaining agent's complicity, which results in two ways of conceptualizing responsibility for

[1]Patriarchal bargains are primarily analyzed in the literature on women's autonomy in gender-oppressive contexts, where theorists debate whether they should be regarded as adaptive preferences (Stoljar 2014), deformed desires (Superson 2005), or autonomous and rational choices within the constraints of oppression (Narayan 2002; Khader 2018).

[2]I use structural injustice and oppression as synonyms, considering gender oppression as a form of structural injustice.

[3]As I will clarify in section 2, the fact that the agent *intentionally* chooses the prudentially best option of complying with an oppressive norm does not necessarily imply that the agent is aware of the oppressive character of the norm. Rather, it refers to the fact that the agent has not internalized the norm (or at least not fully) and complies with it primarily to achieve a prudential benefit.

[4]These are the cases in which the agent intentionally chooses the prudentially best option *and* is also aware of the oppressive implications of their choice.

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structural injustice: forward-looking political responsibility (Young 2011) and backward-looking moral responsibility (Sangiovanni 2018). Both accounts offer a framework to assess the circumstances in which PBs may be considered as justified ways of coping with oppression, by being either compatible with a political commitment to resist structural injustice or morally excused. However, each faces limitations. Forward-looking political responsibility struggles to explain why the bargainer is neither blameworthy nor liable when she is aware of the implications of her choice and does not face unreasonable costs in forgoing the bargain. Backward-looking moral responsibility, in turn, raises two practical concerns: it risks diverting attention from the oppressive structures that constrain individual moral agency, and it may prove divisive and isolating by fostering negative emotions such as guilt and shame that could discourage participation in collective struggles.

In section 4, I address these practical concerns in relation to PBs, also drawing some insights into the broader discussion on responsibility for structural injustice. I argue that, while the backward-looking moral account does not necessarily focus on individuals at the expense of diverting attention from oppressive structures, it may carry negative implications for collective struggles. This suggests that, at least from a practical point of view, a forward-looking political account of responsibility might be more effective in promoting collective actions for structural social change, even if conceptually less accurate.

2. Defining patriarchal bargains as a subset of oppressive double binds

Hirji (2021, 651) defines oppressive double binds as choice situations in which an agent's prudentially best option—complying with an oppressive norm to advance their self-interest—and their morally best option—resisting that norm—are "inextricably bound up together." As she explains:

> If they cooperate, they reinforce the very oppressive norm that in the long run controls their access to security and power. If they resist, they are likely to face immediate harm or sanction for stepping out of line, and in general to be put into a position where their long-term ability to resist oppression is undermined. On either option, they are forced to act against themselves, becoming a tool or mechanism in their own oppression. (Hirji 2021, 654)

To illustrate the distinct oppressive nature of double binds, Hirji (2021, 643–44) examines the case of a junior faculty member who is both the only woman and the only person of color in a philosophy department. The professor is frequently approached by students—primarily women and members of other underrepresented groups—seeking mentorship and emotional support. The demands placed on her confront her with two options:

1. Prioritizing her professional career (*the prudentially best option*): By reducing the time she devotes to mentoring, she can focus on advancing her research and career. However, this choice comes with significant *moral costs*: by neglecting her role as a mentor for students from marginalized groups, she contributes to the perpetuation of the very structures that disadvantage her and others like her. Additionally, this option entails a *residual prudential cost*, as her compliance indirectly reinforces the oppressive norms that constrain her professional opportunities.

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2. Prioritizing mentorship (*the morally best option*): By dedicating substantial time to mentoring students from marginalized groups, she actively supports efforts to diversify the field. However, this choice comes at a high *prudential cost*, as it diverts time and energy from her research, hindering the advancement of her career. This prudential sacrifice, in turn, creates further *residual moral costs*: without professional success, her capacity to challenge structural inequalities in academia diminishes, and her inability to advance professionally risks reinforcing stereotypes, such as the perception that women are less capable philosophers.

In both scenarios, the faculty member becomes a mechanism in her own oppression since choosing to prioritize her career sustains the system of oppression that harms her, while choosing to prioritize mentorship undermines her professional success and long-term capacity to resist oppression.

Hirji's understanding of oppressive double binds shows that an oppressed individual's prudential interests are deeply intertwined with their freedom from oppression, and vice versa (Hirji 2021, 654). This entanglement makes it particularly difficult to assess the extent to which they are responsible for reinforcing their own oppression. When confronted with a double bind, any available option—even the morally best one—inevitably contributes to sustaining the structure that oppresses them.

However, Hirji (2021, 654) also emphasizes that this does not imply that the morally best option and the prudentially best option become indistinguishable, given their downstream effects. While both options contribute to sustaining oppression, they do so to *varying degrees*.[5] Thus, even if the morally best option involves certain prudential costs and residual moral costs, it may still provide the *greatest overall moral benefit*. Conversely, the prudentially best option, despite its moral costs and residual prudential costs, may offer the *greatest overall prudential* benefit.[6] The agent is therefore faced with a choice between two options leading to two distinct outcomes in terms of sustaining oppression, even though *both contribute to it to some extent*.

I define patriarchal bargains as those double binds in which an agent, living under conditions of gender oppression, *intentionally* chooses the prudentially best option over the morally best option, as the former maximizes her prudential benefit (given the associated moral costs and residual prudential costs), even though both options are "inextricably bound up" and so both, *to some extent*, contribute to the perpetuation of oppression. By intentionally choosing the prudentially best option, the agent enters into a bargain with her community: she trades her compliance with an oppressive norm for a specific prudential benefit, while the community, in turn, concedes a certain benefit at the cost of her compliance.

Defining patriarchal bargains as a subset of double binds has several advantages. First, it aptly captures the complex choice structure faced by women in circumstances of oppression, where there is no option that straightforwardly leads to their empowerment,

[5]Actually, the options make the agent complicit not only to varying degrees but also in different ways, since the bargainer may also be knowingly/unknowingly complicit.

[6]I added the qualification "generally making" because there may be cases where choosing the prudentially best option in the present could lead to a morally better outcome in the future. In such cases, this choice would not increase the agent's complicity but could instead improve her prospects for effective resistance. However, these cases require the agent to choose the prudentially best option not to gain the prudential benefit itself, but to use that benefit as a means to achieve a morally better outcome in the future. I do not address these cases here to avoid overcomplicating the refinement of the concept of PBs.

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so long as the oppressive system remains in place. Second, this framing succeeds in reconciling seemingly contrasting views on PBs. For instance, it resonates with Anita Superson (2005) and Natalie Stoljar's (2014) claims that, as long as the system of oppression exists, the agent's desires cannot genuinely be "their own," as all the available options are never *fully* aligned with their interests. Yet, at the same time, it allows us to incorporate the insights of theorists such as Khader (2021), who argues that, under conditions of oppression, precisely because no option is fully aligned with the agent's interests, they may opt for different strategies to promote their well-being and self-respect in their daily life, including compliance with oppressive norms, when openly resisting to them proves too demanding.[7]

To further refine this understanding of PB let me use an example, which I retrieve from Hirji's discussion of double binds itself, where she examines the case of a trans woman who decides to pass as cisgender in a transphobic community. Let's call her Sally. By conforming to certain oppressive norms of femininity, Sally secures the prudential benefit of avoiding punishment or any form of potential backlash from her community. In other words, she trades off her complicity with oppression for her own security.[8]

Hirji's understanding of double binds cautions against superficially framing Sally's decision as a mere weighing of the prudentially best option (passing as cis) against the morally best one (challenging the transphobic narrative of her community), given that—as explained above—the two are "inextricably bound up." The prudentially best option comes at the expense of moral and residual prudential costs and, vice versa, the morally best option comes at the expense of prudential and residual moral costs. Passing as cis (*prudentially best option)* reinforces the oppressive norm according to which women's appearance must conform to certain standards of femininity (*moral cost*), which harms both herself and other women (*residual prudential cost*). Conversely, by resisting and refusing to pass as cis, Sally directly challenges these oppressive norms (*morally best option*) but risks severe backlash (*prudential cost*), which could undermine her ability to resist in the future (*residual moral cost*). Nevertheless, Hirji also explicitly argues that, in this scenario, passing as a cis woman *remains* the prudentially best option, as it provides the greatest overall prudential benefit (security from backlash) given the present circumstances.

What about the intentional character of Sally's decision to comply? This does not figure in Hirji's example, nor in her broader discussion of double binds. She argues that an agent is in a double bind even when she has completely internalized the oppressive norms and is unaware of the circumstances of her choice: "Whether she is aware of it or

[7]While these views on PBs may be reconciled by framing PBs as double binds, they nonetheless diverge in their assessment of the bargainer's autonomy. For instance, while Khader (2018) argues that the bargaining agent acts autonomously and rationally within the constraints of oppression, Stoljar (2014) rejects this view, contending that although the available options may allow the agent to engage in a rational cost-benefit calculation, they remain fundamentally incompatible with autonomy. I do not engage with this debate, as I adopt Hirji's definition of double binds and share her perspective on autonomy and rationality in such contexts (see Hirji 2021, 658–65).

[8]By "certain oppressive norms of femininity", I broadly refer to restrictive standards of appearance (e.g., requiring women to remove body hair, pressuring them to maintain a slim figure, while still conforming to idealized curvy proportions) and behavior (e.g., nurturing others at personal expense or conforming to accommodating behavior) that disproportionally burden those who are socialized as women compared to those who are socialized as men. I set aside a fuller account of what exactly makes these norms oppressive; briefly returning to it later. For a more detailed discussion, see Chambers (2007).

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not, and whether she cares or not, there are still two kinds of goods at stake for her in her choice—her own prudential interests and resistance to oppression—and they cannot be realized independently of each other" (Hirji 2021, 664). Therefore, for the purposes of Hirji's discussion of double binds, it is not particularly relevant whether someone *intentionally* chooses the prudentially best option or does so because she has internalized a certain norm.

However, this distinction is crucial to characterize PBs. The bargainer chooses the prudentially best option qua the prudentially best option. What qualifies her as a bargainer is that her decision to comply is motivated *primarily* by the intention to maximize her prudential benefit.[9] From this perspective, Sally qualifies as such because her compliance is, first and foremost, driven by the intention of avoiding immediate harm. It is in this sense that she *intentionally* chooses the prudentially best option.

By contrast, agents who comply because they have internalized an oppressive norm act from a different order of drivers. Even if their compliance happens to coincide with the prudentially best option, it is not chosen qua prudentially best, but because it accords with what they believe to be right or appropriate. Such compliance therefore cannot be understood as part of a bargain. Take, for example, a case similar to Sally's, but involving a cis woman—let's call her Cathy—who also complies with oppressive norms of femininity. Unlike Sally, Cathy's compliance is not primarily aimed at obtaining a prudential benefit, for instance social approval within a patriarchal community. Rather, her primary driver is her belief that these oppressive norms correctly prescribe how women ought to act. Of course, Cathy may *also* factor the prudential advantages that follow from her compliance into her decision-making process. Yet these benefits are, at most, secondary drivers, which may *strengthen* her resolution to comply, but do not ground it.

Going back to Hirji's definition of double binds, Cathy may indeed be in one, though unaware of it. However, she does not act as a patriarchal bargainer because her compliance is *primarily* driven by her beliefs regarding the oppressive norms she has internalized. We could say—using Narayan's words—that Cathy acts as a "dupe of patriarchy," as her decision is *first* and *foremost* shaped by the norms and expectations of her patriarchal community (Narayan 2002, 420).

Understanding the intentional character of PBs as compliance driven by the intention to achieve a prudential benefit, rather than by internalized beliefs, also helps address a potential objection to considering Sally's decision as intentional. One may

[9]One might object that this definition of patriarchal bargains is too restrictive. Agents may bargain for benefits that are not strictly prudential, for instance, epistemic or aesthetic benefits. A woman, for example, may conform to femininity norms to better understand how such norms operate within her community, or comply with gendered beauty standards as a form of aesthetic exploration. Yet two considerations are in order. First, it is difficult to disentangle these kinds of benefits from prudential considerations. Unless one complies with a norm *purely* for the sake of knowledge, it seems intuitive to think that such knowledge is sought to understand how these norms shape one's life and how to navigate them. Compliance for purely aesthetic purposes also seems intertwined with prudential reasons, since what one finds aesthetically appealing is often shaped by how it is prudentially rewarded. Second, patriarchal bargains are not simple trade-offs in which one type of interest is merely prioritized over another. As a subset of oppressive double binds, what distinguishes their choice structure is that whatever interest is at stake is, in some sense, undermined regardless of the option chosen. Thus, even if we concede cases of intentional compliance to gain purely epistemic or aesthetic benefits, they would count as patriarchal bargains only if these very benefits are themselves compromised by oppression, no matter what the agent does. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for making me reflect on this point, which may warrant further exploration.

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argue that it is inaccurate to say that Sally intentionally complies with an oppressive norm when her only alternative is to face punishment or some form of harm. This might seem akin to claiming that someone intentionally lets robbers into their house when the only alternative is being shot. In such circumstances, it is more accurate to say that Sally and the victim of the robbers are, respectively, coerced into complying with the norm and with the robbers' demands.

Yet, as explained above, by saying that Sally *intentionally* chooses the prudentially best option, I am merely emphasizing that her compliance with the norm is not driven by the internalization of an oppressive norm. I am not denying that the circumstances in which she makes the bargain are life-threatening and coercive. My definition of patriarchal bargains broadly refers to "living under conditions of gender oppression" precisely to encompass a wide range of scenarios, where the costs of non-compliance with oppressive norms may range from subtle disadvantages to escalating into straightforwardly coercive, life-threatening circumstances.[10] Therefore, it comprises cases like Sally's, but also cases where no straightforward coercion is involved. For example, consider a case similar to Cathy's, so one in which a cis woman—let us call her Tracy—complies with oppressive norms of femininity. Unlike Cathy, however, Tracy has not internalized these norms and chooses to comply primarily to gain social approval. Tracy would qualify as a patriarchal bargainer—even if, unlike Sally, the costs of her non-compliance with oppressive norms do not involve any overt or straightforward form of coercion.

As I will show in the next section, evaluating the costs of forgoing a given patriarchal bargain to choose the morally best option is crucial to assessing its relation with a moral or political commitment to resist oppression. For instance, Sally, whose compliance is driven by coercive and life-threatening circumstances, may be exonerated from any criticism from a forward-looking political perspective or morally excused.[11] In contrast, Tracy's case is less straightforward. Without straightforward coercion, the costs of non-compliance are harder to measure, making her bargain more difficult to assess under either account of responsibility.

This evaluation represents one of two key factors in assessing the bargainer's responsibility. The second concerns whether the bargainer recognizes any moral cost associated with her choice—something that does not necessarily follow from the intentional character of her decision.

While the intentional nature of patriarchal bargains involves compliance without having internalized an oppressive norm, this does not mean the bargainer necessarily *sees* the norm she complies with as oppressive. She may contest it—finding it burdensome or inconvenient—without necessarily experiencing it as oppressive and, consequently, without recognizing any moral cost attached to her compliance.

[10]This framework excludes the "dupes of patriarchy" as bargainers, given that their decision to choose the prudentially best option is not intentional (Narayan 2002, 420). However, it includes what Narayan defines as "prisoners of patriarchy," namely women who are coerced into choosing the prudentially best option ((Narayan 2002, 420)). I believe this inclusion broadens the scope of the framework and helps to better illustrate the range of cases in which the moral and political responsibility of the bargainer can be assessed.

[11]As I will illustrate in section 4, this does not imply that Sally is entirely free from responsibility to resist oppression. While she may be exonerated from any criticism (from a forward-looking political perspective) or morally excused from backward-looking moral responsibility to resist oppression through non-compliance, she may still have less risky and less demanding political or moral duties. These could include indirect actions, such as writing a memoir detailing the harms of living in a transphobic community, which could inspire other people in the future to challenge and transform oppressive structures.

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Consider one of the paradigmatic cases of patriarchal bargaining: the Sufi Pirzada women discussed by Narayan (2002). These women "live in relative purdah (or seclusion) within the home and are expected to always veil when in public" (Narayan 2002, 419). While they voice a wide range of criticisms against these practices, they do not view the expectations behind them as oppressive, instead they consider these practices as self-limiting. For instance, they complain about the physical discomfort of veiling in hot weather, the difficulty of seeing properly, and the risk of tripping into drains (420). Many also acknowledge that purdah and mandatory veiling contribute to broader constraints in their lives, such as preventing them from learning basic skills like crossing busy roads or orienting themselves in local streets (420).

These criticisms are often outweighed by stronger prudential reasons to comply. For instance, not wearing a veil might seriously harm their reputation or jeopardize their marriage prospects. As a result, some of them intentionally choose the prudentially best option of following these practices to secure these benefits (420).[12] Yet, because they do not perceive the expectations behind the practices as oppressive, there are no moral costs of compliance factored into their decision-making process. In other words, while they may criticize these practices or harbor mixed feelings about them, in their view, their compliance does not represent a form of *complicity* in oppression.

Compare this to Sally's situation. She is aware that choosing the prudentially best option comes at the moral cost of reinforcing what she recognizes as an oppressive norm. For her, unlike the Sufi Pirzada women, this choice goes beyond mere compliance with a burdensome norm—it represents complicity in sustaining the oppressive structure that governs her community, where those who do not conform to a strict gender binary face backlash. While both Sally and the Sufi Pirzada women may be seen as patriarchal bargainers who intentionally select the prudentially best option to secure certain benefits, only Sally factors in the moral cost of this decision. Any adequate assessment of the bargainer's responsibility must therefore also account for this difference in awareness.

Before turning to that assessment, however, an important disclaimer is in order regarding the way I conceive of complicity with oppression through compliance with an oppressive norm. Narayan (2002, 420) does not treat the practices discussed above as grounded in *inherently* oppressive norms, but as embedded in patriarchal structures that systematically disadvantage women and advantage men—noting, for instance, that expectations of womanly modesty and propriety carry multiple meanings *beyond* oppression. Drawing on the analogous example of wearing makeup or engaging in beauty regimens, she warns against reducing the range of meanings behind such practices to a single interpretation (421). I concur. Therefore, even though for the purpose of assessing the bargainer's responsibility for her complicity with oppression, I focus specifically on the dimension of these norms that contributes to the perpetuation of oppressive structures, I do not imply that this entirely exhausts their meaning.

I now turn to the assessment of the bargainer's responsibility, drawing on the literature on responsibility for structural injustice.

[12]The example focuses on prudential reasons to comply with these practices because these are crucial to framing this instance of compliance as a case of bargaining. This does not exclude, however, that women also comply with these practices for reasons that are neither prudential nor related to oppression—as I briefly discuss later, multiple meanings can be attached to these practices, and so too can multiple reasons for complying with them.

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3. The bargainer's responsibility

The concept of structural injustice captures the complex and pervasive nature of various social issues, from gender oppression to the climate change crisis. Describing these injustices as "structural" emphasizes how the complex interaction of social norms, practices, and ordinary, everyday actions carried out by a multitude of individuals can contribute to harmful systems and institutions.

However, theorists of structural injustice disagree on the way in which we should judge individual agents' contribution to such injustice. Iris Marion Young (2011) argues that agents should not be considered morally responsible for their individual contributions to structural injustice—and thus should not be held blameworthy and liable—because, first, they usually do not act with the intention of contributing to injustice; second, they are often unaware of the implications of their actions; and third, their individual contributions do not make any perceptible causal difference to the broader system of injustice, if taken singularly. Given these features of agents' complicity in structural injustice, she suggests replacing the traditional backward-looking understanding of legal and moral responsibility with a forward-looking political reconceptualization of responsibility.[13] On this account, all agents implicated in structures of injustice, although not blameworthy or liable for their contributions, share a forward-looking political responsibility to engage in collective action aimed at structural change, following parameters that, for instance, take into account the likely impact of resistance and the costs involved.

This reconceptualization of responsibility has been criticized on several grounds.[14] According to Andrea Sangiovanni (2018), Young overlooks a crucial distinction between backward-looking moral responsibility, on the one hand, and blameworthiness and liability, on the other, assuming that moral responsibility automatically entails both. He argues that what matters for assessing an individual's moral responsibility for complicity in oppression is different from what matters for assessing blameworthiness and liability. For moral responsibility, the key question is whether an action is both wrongful and ascribable to a particular agent. (Sangiovanni 2018, 468). Thus, even if an agent's compliance with an oppressive norm sustains injustice only *unintentionally* and *minimally*, she can still be considered morally responsible for that contribution. By contrast, with respect to blameworthiness and liability, an agent may be morally excused if she is *unaware* of the impact of her contribution or if acting otherwise would be excessively demanding.

We thus have two ways of framing the bargainer's complicity in injustice: one political and one moral, with the latter further distinguishing between moral responsibility, on the one hand, and blameworthiness and liability, on the other. The following two sections examine each in turn.

3.1. Forward-looking political responsibility

To illustrate why an agent whose actions contribute to structural injustice should not be deemed morally responsible, and therefore neither blameworthy nor liable, Young (2011, 107–8) offers the following example. In the US, parents often choose housing based on the quality and reputation of local public schools to avoid sending their

[13]Besides these theoretical reasons, Young (2011) also advances a practical concern for using an account of backward-looking moral responsibility in circumstances of structural injustice, this will be addressed in section 4.

[14]See Barry and Ferracioli (2013); Estlund (2024); Nussbaum (2011); Sangiovanni (2018).

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children to underfunded or overcrowded schools. This, however, drives up housing prices in desirable areas and arguably contributes to inequality in schools between rich and poor neighborhoods. Although some parents may be aware of their contribution to this injustice, they feel powerless to change the system and thus comply with it.

In these circumstances, Young (2011) argues that parents should not be morally judged for their choices. First, they do not intend to contribute to injustice—some may not even realize they are doing so—but are simply trying to provide a good education for their children. Second, their individual actions, taken alone, cannot significantly influence the system of injustice, which explains why they feel powerless. Parents operate within a complex web of social norms, practices, and the everyday actions of many individuals. In this context, their single choices do not have a direct causal impact on the broader system of inequality. Whether or not a parent acts differently (assuming everyone else's actions remain the same) does not make a noticeable difference to the larger pattern of injustice. However, Young (2011, 108) argues that, even if the parents cannot be considered morally responsible, their actions still generate a shared, forward-looking political responsibility to collectively address and dismantle this injustice.[15]

The reasoning behind this example may apply just as well to the case of the bargainer. First, consider the intention behind the bargainer's actions. As seen in the previous section, this consists in securing a prudential benefit—much like the parents in Young's example who want to provide a good education for their children—rather than in contributing to oppression. The Sufi Pirzada women comply with oppressive norms without recognizing them as such, and are therefore unaware of the implications of their choice for the perpetuation of oppression. Sally, by contrast, does recognize her bargain as a form of complicity with oppression, yet she is coerced into it. But even Tracy, who is not coerced and we may hypothesize as aware of the implications of her choice, cannot be considered as *intentionally contributing to injustice*. Her complicity is better understood as a side effect of pursuing a prudential benefit.

Second, the bargainer's individual actions, like those of the parents, occur within the constraints of a larger system of oppression. Therefore, the bargainer's compliance, taken alone, does not *significantly* affect this system—either improving or worsening it—if enough others' actions remain unchanged. This means that, regardless of whether it is the Sufi Pirzada women, Sally, or Tracy complying with the oppressive norms of their respective communities, such compliance—when taken individually—will not *significantly* impact the persistence of these norms.

If all this is true, following Young (2011), we should conclude that the bargainer is not morally responsible, nor blameworthy or liable, for her complicity in the system, regardless of whether she is aware of it. However, like the parents in Young's example, her actions generate a forward-looking political responsibility to help dismantle the structure of injustice. The next question is: What does this forward-looking political responsibility involve for the bargainer?

Forward-looking political responsibility focuses on what individuals can do to address and dismantle structural injustice collectively. It is forward-looking because it shifts attention from judging whether individual past actions are morally right or wrong to working toward structural change in the future. It is political because it requires individuals to collaborate, organize, and actively participate in collective efforts to drive transformative social change.

[15]For a clarification of what exactly generates forward-looking political responsibility see McKeown (2018).

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Young (2011) does not prescribe specific actions for agents to fulfill their forward-looking political responsibility. Yet she offers some parameters of reasoning to guide individuals in determining what actions make the most sense for them, considering their specific abilities, circumstances, and the broader context of injustice they seek to address. These are power, privilege, interest, and collective ability (Young 2011, 142–51). According to her, powerful and privileged agents should take active steps to mitigate the harmful effects of their actions. Conversely, those in relatively weaker positions within these structures, but with a strong interest in dismantling them, can often mount little else than organizing efforts that criticize and pressure more powerful actors, unless they can draw on the resources of an already existing group of support for social change (Young 2011, 153).

Criticism, according to Young (2011, 144), plays a crucial role. [16] In fact, while forward-looking political responsibility does not assign specific duties to resist injustice, nor does it hold individuals liable or blameworthy for their contributions to injustice, agents may still be criticized for their inaction or insufficient efforts. Specifically, they may be criticized for "not taking action, not taking enough action, taking ineffective action, or taking action that is counterproductive," depending on their abilities and circumstances within the structural context (Young 2011, 144).

Forward-looking political responsibility for a bargainer thus involves reflecting on one's social position within oppressive structures and facing criticism when, despite having the capacity to prioritize the morally best option (resisting the norm), one chooses to bargain instead.

Consider, for example, the case of Sally. Based on the four parameters, she is particularly vulnerable to injustice. She lacks power or privilege in her transphobic community, where non-compliance with oppressive norms exposes her to physical threats. At the same time, she has a strong interest in dismantling transphobia and gender oppression. Additionally, we might assume that she has no other community from which she can draw support.

Under these conditions, Sally's choice to bargain does not seem subject to criticism, but compatible with forward-looking political responsibility. This is especially true if, while bargaining, she actively seeks to contribute to social change in less risky or demanding ways. For instance, she might engage in what Khader (2021) calls the cultivation of counterhegemonic perspectives, a form of resistance that does not necessarily require noncompliance. Sally could, for example, talk to those from whom she does not fear backlash, such as people close to her, about the harms of living in a transphobic community; she might keep a diary that could later inspire others to challenge and transform the very oppressive structures that compel her to conceal her identity or seek the support of other trans women with similar experiences and begin building a network of solidarity and mutual aid.

Similarly, the Sufi Pirzada women cannot be criticized for their bargains. Their lack of privilege and power within their community, combined with the fact that they do not see their compliance as contributing to oppression, shields them from such criticism. For women in this position, forward-looking political responsibility might involve, for example, reflecting on their dissatisfaction with the constraints imposed on them, examining it and eventually talking about it with women in similar positions.[17]

[16]For a detailed distinction between blame and criticism see Zheng (2019).

[17]I think Saba Mahmood's (2004) invitation to focus not only on women's choices and acts of subversion but also on their practices of self-relation and processes of subject formation is particularly relevant here.

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Now consider Tracy, who complies with oppressive norms not out of coercion but for social approval. Unlike Sally or the Sufi Pirzada women, Tracy's non-compliance would not lead to significant harm or disruption in her life. Let's assume that her position within the structure allows her to forgo the prudentially best option and instead choose the morally best one without incurring excessive costs. This might be due to various factors. For instance, we might hypothesize that she is a white woman working in a large, female-led firm where there is a strong sense of community and solidarity among women advocating for workplace empowerment.

Based on the four parameters, it seems Tracy should opt for resistance, especially in collaboration with other women in the firm. If she instead chooses to bargain, she could be criticized for contributing to injustice. While she would not necessarily be considered blameworthy, her PB in this case may be deemed incompatible with her forward-looking political responsibility for addressing structural injustice.

This approach to responsibility has the advantage of addressing the two key factors outlined in the previous section. First, the four parameters proposed by Young provide guidance for assessing when forgoing a patriarchal bargain becomes too costly for an agent, thereby helping to determine when bargaining remains compatible with a forward-looking political responsibility to address injustice. Second, it acknowledges that agents may not always be fully aware of their complicity in perpetuating oppression. Yet even in such cases, it maintains that individuals can still bear a minimal form of forward-looking political responsibility, which is not necessarily incompatible with their bargaining. This perspective thus offers a nuanced account of how bargainers bear responsibility for structural injustice without requiring direct resistance in every situation.

Yet this framework reveals a conceptual limitation, which forms the basis of Sangiovanni's argument for reintegrating backward-looking moral responsibility, on the one hand, and liability and culpability, on the other, into discussions of structural injustice. Why should individuals not be regarded as wrongdoers, regardless of how minor, untraceable, or unintentional their contribution may be? After all, they still causally contribute to the structure of injustice, and in some cases—though not all—they do so knowingly and without facing excessive costs were they to act otherwise. It is to this question that the following section turns.

3.2. Backward-looking moral responsibility

Sangiovanni (2018) criticizes Young's conceptualization of responsibility for structural injustice, drawing on Derek Parfit's *Harmless Torturers* thought experiment (Parfit 1984). In this scenario, 1,000 households are connected to a torture machine. Each household's action of turning on a light switch slightly increases the pain experienced by a victim attached to the machine. The incremental impact of any single household's action is untraceable, making it difficult to determine who generated any particular effect, and so small that it is imperceptible to the victim. Yet, when all households act collectively, the victim suffers excruciating pain.

Sangiovanni (2018) uses this example to argue that individuals cannot be granted a moral free pass simply because their actions—taken in isolation—have an untraceable and imperceptible impact on the overall production of harm. Even if flipping a single switch does not perceptibly harm the victim and cannot be identified as the tipping switch that actually causes the excruciating pain, each household's action remains part of the causal chain sustaining the system of torture (Sangiovanni 2018, 477). Moreover, this

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holds regardless of the torturers' intentions: although they may flip the switches merely to light their homes, and not to harm anyone, they can still be considered morally responsible for contributing to the overall production of harm.

By analogy, in cases of structural injustice, the fact that an individual's contribution is minimal, untraceable, or unintentional does not exempt them from moral responsibility. As long as their actions causally contribute to an unjust structure, they bear some degree of responsibility. In particular, what matters to this assessment is whether their causal contribution makes an expected marginal moral difference given what others can be expected to do. At the same time, Sangiovanni acknowledges that individuals who contribute to structural injustice may, under certain circumstances, be *morally excused* and thus absolved of both liability and blameworthiness. This is where the distinction between moral responsibility, on the one hand, and liability and blameworthiness, on the other, becomes relevant.

For Sangiovanni (2018, 468), attributing moral responsibility involves identifying an action as both wrongful and ascribable to a particular agent. In the context of structural injustice, this allows us to hold an agent responsible for contributing to the system, no matter how small their contribution, even if we cannot determine which specific aspect of the structure—or which resulting harm—is sustained by it—just as we cannot know which household flipped the tipping switch that caused excruciating pain to the tortured victim. By contrast, whether an agent should be held liable or blamed depends on additional factors, such as whether they are aware of the broader implications of their actions or could have acted otherwise without incurring unreasonable costs (2018, 478).

With respect to awareness, Sangiovanni notes that agents become blameworthy and liable once they come to recognize the implications of their actions. As for demandingness, echoing Young, he argues that assessments of liability and blameworthiness must take into account an individual's situation and relationship to the structures they help reproduce. Factors such as vulnerability, power, and capacity to act meaningfully against injustice affect the degree of one's liability and blameworthiness.

For instance, individuals already unfairly burdened by structural injustice—such as particularly vulnerable victims—may be fully morally excused for their contributions when acting otherwise would be excessively demanding. In such circumstances, they may have to depend on those in stronger positions to take action or, alternatively and where possible, seek to mitigate their complicity through less demanding forms of resistance.

Crucially, however, unlike in Young's account, Sangiovanni maintains that these contributions still constitute participation in wrongdoing—even if the wrongdoing is morally excusable. They are not merely opportunities to correct injustices for which one bears no backward-looking responsibility. Rather, these individuals remain responsible, though excused.

Returning to bargaining, Sangiovanni's account suggests that a bargainer generally qualifies as *a morally responsible wrongdoer*, but may be morally excused for her bargain—and thus absolved of both liability and blameworthiness—under certain conditions. This may occur when, due to her vulnerability, the morally best option would be too demanding for her to choose, or when she is unaware of her complicity in oppression. However, in the latter case, she becomes blameworthy and liable as soon as she becomes aware of her role in sustaining oppressive structures.

Consider, for instance, a bargainer like Sally, who is aware of oppressive norms but faces severe risks or harm if she openly resists them. In such circumstances, her decision to prioritize her own prudential interests may be morally excused. She may legitimately

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defer direct resistance to those in less vulnerable positions and, if possible, seek to mitigate her complicity through compensatory or less demanding forms of action. Similarly, the Sufi Pirzada women—who lack privilege and power within their community and are also unaware of their complicity—may equally be morally excused. However, once they recognize the implications of their actions, and resisting is not unreasonably demanding given their vulnerability, they may become blameworthy and liable for their contributions to injustice.

By contrast, Tracy represents a different case. Unlike Sally or the Sufi Pirzada women, she is in a position to avoid contributing to oppression without incurring unreasonable costs and is aware of the implications of her action. Accordingly, she not only bears moral responsibility for her bargain but is also blameworthy and liable for her complicity in oppression.

Framing the bargainer's responsibility as backward-looking and moral aligns with a more conventional understanding of responsibility. This approach prevents the need to reconceptualize responsibility for structural injustice and simply extends the traditional concept of moral responsibility to this domain. It also addresses what David Estlund (2024) calls "the grievance challenge," which posits that theories of responsibility for structural injustice should account for attitudes of grievance—such as offense, resentment, indignation, righteous anger, or feeling morally ashamed of one's society—that naturally arise in response to injustice. These attitudes cannot be fully understood without framing the agent's contribution to injustice as a wrongdoing.

Yet, while this framing may appear more plausible, given its proximity to shared moral intuitions and its ability to assess cases where the agent is knowingly complicit in oppression despite the possibility of acting otherwise without unreasonable costs, it also faces some practical concerns. For instance, in cases of oppressive double binds, Hirji (2021) argues that a focus on individual moral agency risks overshadowing responsibility "at the level of the oppressive structures that make it impossible for an agent not to be complicit in their own oppression" (668). In other words, holding individuals morally responsible in these contexts may fail to adequately account for the structural constraints shaping their actions.

Young (2011) similarly argues that, beyond the non-intentional and minimal character of individual contributions to structural injustice, there are more practical reasons to support a shift from backward-looking individual moral responsibility to forward-looking political responsibility. She argues that holding individuals responsible is strategically misguided because "it tends to make people defensive and to engage in blame switching," rather than focusing on coordinating collective efforts against structural injustice (Young 2011, 100). Trying to find a culprit, a person on whom to pin the wrongdoing, makes the project of fighting injustice more difficult to carry out because people accused in this way are likely to turn defensive or feel ashamed, and hence less likely to engage in shared political struggles. For instance, blaming the bargainer for what she does may antagonize victims of oppression when they already find themselves in an oppressive double bind and further contribute to the fragmentation of collective struggles.

These practical concerns are significant as they invite consideration of how responsibility for structural injustice should be conceptualized, considering how different accounts of responsibility might impact the oppressed and the coordination of collective struggles in practice. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address these concerns in the broader context of theories of responsibility for structural injustice,

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in the next section, I focus on their relevance to PBs. By doing so, I also aim to offer insights that may contribute to the wider debate on this topic.

In response to the first concern, I argue that examining the agent's moral responsibility, blameworthiness, and liability, namely those elements that constitute a backward-looking moral account of responsibility in Sangiovanni's account, does not necessarily detract from addressing the oppressive structures that limit their agency. In response to the second, I acknowledge that whether emphasizing the bargainer's blameworthiness undermines the coordination of collective struggles for structural change remains an open question—one that is also largely empirical in nature. Nonetheless, I examine how such a focus *could* have negative implications for collective struggles, and suggest that, at least from a practical perspective, a forward-looking political account of responsibility may be more effective in promoting collective action against structural injustice.

4. The bargainer's backward-looking moral responsibility and implications for structural social change

To address the concern that focusing on the bargainer's backward-looking moral responsibility for structural injustice may divert attention from the oppressive structures constraining individual agency, two interrelated points can be made.

First, Sangiovanni's account explicitly considers the bargainer's specific circumstances and their relationship to the structures they help sustain in its assessment of the agent's blameworthiness and liability (Sangiovanni 2018, 478). This means that assessing specifically blameworthiness and liability—does not occur in isolation but is deeply tied to an analysis of the structural constraints shaping the agent's choices. In fact, evaluating the bargainer's potential moral excuses for blameworthiness and liability necessitates a thorough examination of the very structures that perpetuate injustice.

Second, adopting a backward-looking perspective can enhance our understanding of how structural injustice is reproduced through individual actions. As Young (2011) herself argues, it is essential to look backward to grasp the mechanisms of structural processes. She writes:

> Understanding how structural processes produce and reproduce injustice requires having an account of how they have come about and operated in the past coming up to the present. Having such a backward-looking account also helps those of us who participate in those processes understand our role in them. (Young 2011, 109)[18]

The other practical concern, according to which focusing on blame undermines the coordination of collective efforts for structural change, is more difficult to address, as it raises questions that would also require empirical investigation to be fully resolved. Without the ability to conduct such an investigation here, I will tentatively explore a concrete scenario that is often depicted by theorists who are skeptical of backward-looking moral accounts of responsibility for structural injustice.

For instance, Heather Widdows (2021), in the context of discussing oppressive beauty standards, argues that focusing on women's individual moral responsibility to

[18]Despite her arguments in favor of a forward-looking approach, Young (2011, 109) recognizes the value of considering a backward-looking perspective, yet she emphasizes that this should not result in moral judgments about the perpetuation of structural injustice.

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resist these standards often serves to divide women and provoke feelings of shame and guilt.[19] From her perspective, backward-looking moral responsibility ends up depicting some women as morally superior when they defy these standards, while portraying others as complicit victims of gender oppression, rather than uniting all of them against the common harms deriving from these standards. Widdows (2021) even contends that framing women's compliance with beauty norms in this way risks becoming as shaming as the very physical imperfections that drive women to engage in beauty practices, since examining what individuals do (and do not do) increases the attention on their bodies and makes them self-conscious just as much.

Moreover, even though a backward-looking moral account of responsibility may allow that bargaining can be morally excused, women may still experience feelings of guilt, shame, or defensiveness. For instance, women might withdraw from activism or avoid joining social movements if they fear being judged for engaging in bargaining, even when they have a legitimate moral excuse. This dynamic disproportionately affects those who are most vulnerable to oppression, as they are more likely to encounter circumstances that require bargaining and, consequently, are more frequently subjected to moral scrutiny. These women must justify their actions more often than their privileged counterparts and simultaneously contend with the negative emotions—such as guilt and shame—that may accompany their choices as bargainers. Crucially, one of the main sources of these emotions is their socialization into a gendered ethics of self-sacrifice, in which women are expected to subordinate their own interests and needs to uphold certain moral standards (Wolf 2016).[20]

These seem to be compelling practical reasons against adopting a backward-looking moral account of responsibility for structural injustice. By contrast, a forward-looking political account fares better, at least in this respect.[21] While it relies on criticism in cases where individuals have the option to choose the morally better course of action, it does not express a moral judgment on them, thus avoiding blaming and shaming, which could discourage people from participating in collective struggles for social change.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I had two overarching goals. The first was to refine the concept of PBs and identify the circumstances under which they can serve as a coping mechanism for oppression, while remaining compatible with either a forward-looking political responsibility or a backward-looking moral responsibility to resist structural injustice. I have thus defined PBs as a subset of oppressive double binds, in which an agent, under conditions of gender oppression, intentionally chooses the prudentially best option—complying with an oppressive norm—over the morally best option—resisting the norm—even though both options are "inextricably bound up" (Hirji 2021, 645). I have then examined two frameworks to assess the bargainer's responsibility for choosing the

[19]Widdows, like Young, considers backward-looking moral responsibility as including also considerations regarding blameworthiness and liability.

[20]I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

[21]When I say that a forward-looking political account "fares better, at least in this respect," I am referring to the concern for the coordination of collective efforts for structural change. However, this does not exclude the possibility that backward-looking moral responsibility may fare well or even better in *other* practical respects. Here, I focus only on those concerns that the literature on structural injustice has emphasized thus far.

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prudentially best option: forward-looking political responsibility (Young 2011) and backward-looking moral responsibility (Sangiovanni 2018) and examined under what circumstances bargaining is compatible with either framework.

The second goal was to show how PBs can inform discussions about how to conceptualize responsibility for structural injustice—particularly with respect to the issue of how women—and more broadly, members of oppressed groups—are often blamed for being complicit with the systems that oppress them. I hope to have fulfilled this by examining the practical concerns faced by the moral backward-looking account of responsibility and concluding that, although more conceptually sound, this account may actually discourage people—especially those who are most vulnerable to oppression—from participating in collective struggles for social change.

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