One Oppression or Many?

Lani Roberts, Ph.D.

Introductory Remarks

As a moral philosopher, the dark side of human social relationships is of interest and concern to me. Oppression, i.e., institutionalized dominance of one part of humanity by another, is one such phenomenon. In groups, often blindly, humans participate in or tolerate oppression of some of us by others. From a myriad of differences, whether real or perceived, a few aspects of who persons are become so laded with disvalue that our common humanity is obscured. The differences upon which oppression is based include, but are not limited to, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social and economic class, religious belief, disability and age.

In spite of the wide-ranging consequences of institutionalized domination, there are few theories or models in philosophy characterizing the structure of oppression. Additionally, each that does exist was written to address a different and specific form of oppression rather than examining the issue generally. For example, Frye's focus is gender oppression[1] and Hallie develops the concept of institutional cruelty through a look at racial/ethnic domination.[2]   Pharr examines discrimination based on sexual orientation and catalogues "The Common Elements of Oppression."[3] Ruether provides yet another perspective from which to examine this destructive phenomenon of our shared human condition by noting the radical embodiment shared by woman and peoples of colors.[4]

Other works in moral philosophy identify and describe some of the human attitudes which make hierarchy and oppression possible and prescribe alternative, morally superior ways of being. For example, Buber notes that when we take out from persons particulars of their

characteristics, we make them into "Its" rather than "Thous."[5] Royce discusses our tendencies to consider others as not as real as we are.[6]

Although existing theories of oppression, e.g., Frye and Hallie, differ at one level, that is, according to the specific target groups addressed, they also share considerable common features. All recognize the necessity of a power differential in the institutionalization of privilege and dominance. Most address a more insidious characteristic of oppression, the degree to which normative attitudes, meanings and judgements can be and are buried in our informal social practices, our language, even our perceptions. Oppression that is thus built into a society is rendered invisible to a stunning degree, that is unless one is a member of its target group. Because of its apparent "normality," much oppression is able to remain at the edge of our collective awareness where we can deny its very existence and the powerlessness of those affected prevents us from hearing their voices. Some of the other features shared by the different types of oppression include horizontal hostility, internalized oppression, the problem of assimilation and the role of violence.

In spite of these theoretical and structural similarities, there is a strong presupposition to the effect that each form of systematic domination or oppression is essentially distinct from the others. Sexism is presumed to be fundamentally different from racism which, in turn, is thought to be clearly distinguishable from classism. It is, of course, true that gender is something different from race or age. Although the characteristics of people who are targets of each of the individual kinds of oppression differ, and even though many people are multiply oppressed, there is good reason to question the underlying assumption that each form of oppression is separate and distinct from the other.

Over the past five years, in teaching the philosophy of oppression, I have often been struck by the consistent flexibility of a theory to explore and explain the multiple kinds of oppression in addition to the one for which it was written. It is this fact which caused me to begin this enquiry; I have been led ask: are there many oppressions or one? This question has not been addressed in moral philosophy as far as I

can tell and it begs to be done. To this end, I will first give brief sketches of two theories of oppression, give a summary of what Suzanne Pharr calls "The Common Elements of Oppression" and, finally, show how Buber's distinction between I-Thou and I-It explains the very possibility of and, conversely, a logical barrier to oppression. In addition to being philosophically interesting, I think answering this question has important and practical consequences to which I will return.

For this project, it is essential that we keep in mind the distinction between a theory of oppression and its various instantiations, that is, the "isms."   Although it is clear that some of us can be subjected to several different kinds of domination at once, this is a material condition rather than an aspect of theoretical structure. Let us take, for example, the relationship between racism and classism; persons of color are also predominantly members of the under class. This tells us something about the phenomenal manifestation of oppression but little about its structure. That the target groups of dominance differ according to a shared attribute or set of attributes does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the theoretical structures of the pertinent oppressions differ any more than we would conclude from the fact that because scalene and isosceles triangles differ significantly in the kinds of angles each has, that they are not both triangles. Analogously, because a person of color is also poor and is subject to both racism and classism, does not necessarily mean that the theoretical structures of these two "isms" are not identical.

Enquiry into the relationship between kinds of oppression raises several possibilities. Perhaps there are multiple yet distinct oppressions. If this is so, are there philosophical relationships among them? What might these be? Perhaps the wide range of similarities will yield a Wittgensteinian family resemblance as the best characterization of the multiple oppressions present in our society. If, however, the question I raise is best answered with the "family resemblance" panacea, what then are the theoretical distinctions between racism and sexism, for example. Let me emphasize again - the question I raise has to do with the philosophical structure of social dominance rather than the discreet manifestations based on distinct target groups. I suspect, given the many deep

correspondences shared by specifically-focused theories of oppression, it is at least plausible to suggest that there is a single phenomenon called oppression. In other words, perhaps we have only one monster with several heads rather than many monsters hiding in our communal closet. Let us now turn to looking at the two most well-developed theories of systematic oppression present in society.

<u>Hallie and Frye</u>

Philip Hallie, in an article called "From Cruelty to Goodness," gives a moral analysis of the condition of Jews at the hands of the Nazi's during World War II. His stated aim is to discover ultimate cruelty and ultimate goodness through this analysis. He also includes, interestingly, several analogous descriptions of the institution of slavery in the United States. He calls the phenomenon he describes "institutional cruelty." I take his institutional cruelty to be what current literature calls oppression.

Embedded in his examination is a fully developed theory of institutional cruelty with a set of criteria. For Hallie, the ultimate cruelty one can do to others is to maim their dignity and crush their self-respect. He calls this "substantial cruelty" and distinguishes it from physical pain, episodic and other kinds of cruelty. Substantial cruelty, then, becomes the first criterion of institutional cruelty. He goes on to note that when substantial cruelty is built into a society and culture and maintained by language, the substantial cruelty becomes institutionalized. Because of its pervasive presence, by virtue of being cultural, substantial cruelty can operate at the edge of our awareness. Hallie says both the victim and victimizer work to obscure the harm that is being done. The victim comes to think of himself or herself as deserving the humiliation and the victimizer comes to feel he is superior and deserves to be in control of "lower beings." It is helpful to think about the "edge of awareness" as very like peripheral vision. We can be aware of the cruelty if we choose but we can just as readily declare that it does not exist. It seems to

me this is an all too common means by which we deny the ongoing harm done to groups of people by our social policies and individual behaviors. Finally, Hallie points out that whatever else may be the case, for substantial cruelty to become institutional, there must be a power differential between the victims and the victimizers, whether the power is economic, political, or social. So, we have here the four criteria of institutional cruelty. If there is a social dynamic which exhibits these four aspects, we have oppression.

Quite important to Hallie's discussion is his inclusion of the significance of perspective to the awareness and acknowledgment of institutional cruelty. He says that it is important to recognize that the point of view of the victim is authoritative. He goes on to point out that "(t)he sword does not feel the pain it inflicts. Do not ask it about suffering."[7] This is a crucial understanding because, otherwise, those in positions of power over others can simply deny the first criterion, maimed dignity and crushed self-respect. He illustrates this with the Nazi soldier who denies that Jews are fully persons and thus can harm them without having to "see" and acknowledge the pain he is causing. Hallie says that without a willingness to hear the victim's voice, we can look upon cruelty with an indifferent eye, we can countenance and perpetuate cruelty with impunity.

A second flexible and useful model of oppression is described by Marilyn Frye in "Oppression," a chapter from *The Politics of Reality*. Her theory of sexism includes what I call "the bird cage model of oppression." Frye defines oppression as the experience of "being caught between or among forces or barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility."[8] The birdcage of oppression is constructed of individual wires, each of which stands for a single barrier to social mobility. Singularly, each can do nothing in the way of restraining anyone. However, taken together, the wires are systematically arranged in such a way as to encage whoever is caught inside.

One can take both microscopic and macroscopic views of the birdcage.   When one

looks at a single wire of the birdcage, it is unclear why the oppressed does not simply go around the barrier. However, taking a step back and looking macroscopically, the entire cage becomes visible and then the inability of the oppressed to escape the confinement becomes more clear. Victim blaming is a ready by-product of looking from the microscopic perspective. For example, in many instances of classism, the person who is homeless or on welfare is told, "just get a job," with unemployment being a single wire of the cage. From the perspective of one more economically privileged, getting a job seems to be the solution to the conditions of poverty. However, if the perspective is shifted to a macroscopic one, we can see that just getting a job is not nearly so simple. A homeless person needs an address and/or phone number, clean clothes, bathing facilities, etc. A single mother on welfare needs to find child care in order to work but often the child care is unaffordable on the minimum wage she is likely to be paid. So, we blame the victims by viewing their situation as more simple than it actually is. If we were to take a broader view, we could see that there are many complex, interwoven, mutually self-reinforcing aspects of poverty and, together, they are systematically arranged in such a way that "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps" becomes no more than a faint possibility at best.

An additional aspect of Frye's model of oppression is the "double-bind," a "damned if you do - damned if you don't," "caught between a rock and a hard place" situation which is a hallmark of oppression. This is, according to Frye, one of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people. A double-bind is a situation in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation. She goes on to give an example of the requirement that oppressed people smile and be cheerful. Compliance signals docility and acquiescence while refusal to comply with this expectation exposes the oppressed to being perceived as bitter, angry or dangerous, difficult or unpleasant to work with, resulting in the corresponding punishment or

violent neglect.[9] This is a no-win situation. Other examples abound. One particularly clear double bind is faced by gays, lesbians and bisexuals in a heterosexist society. If gay persons remain closeted for self-protection, they live a lie and suffer quite profound emotional and psychological harm. However, on the other hand, if they come out and publicly live their lives as who they are, they risk insulting degradation, physical beatings and even death. Double binds can be recognized in all of the kinds of oppression we have in our society.

Notice that these two models or theories of oppression are highly flexible. Although each was designed to illuminate the systematic dominance of a particular community of people, both can be used to understand and analyze all of the "isms." Although Hallie's "institutional cruelty" was designed to reveal conditions of dominance of the Jewish people during World War II and, derivatively, American slavery, it also is applicable to other forms of oppression. Try, for example, the treatment of gays and lesbians in our society today, or the genocidal destruction of the indigenous people of any land. The same versatility is true of Frye's "birdcage model" which is quite helpful in showing the systematic structure of classism, ableism and the other "isms." If, as I surmise, any adequate theory of oppression will be adaptable to the explication of the various kinds of systematic social dominance, then we properly ought to ask whether the various kinds of oppression are actually discreet and distinct or, instead, are individual manifestations of a single dynamic.

"Common Elements of Oppression"

Suzanne Pharr lists in fascinating detail the common characteristics of a variety of social dominances. Although she does not produce a theory or model of oppression, her work is important to my question because it is here we may find the distinctions required to maintain that there are, in fact, multiple and distinct oppressions. Over the past five years, I've challenged my students to take these features of oppression and apply them to the widest

possible range of target groups to see if they all apply to every group. As we look at a selection

of these commonalities, I will note the single challenging exception to my hypothesis at the

relevant point. Interestingly enough, Suzanne Pharr maintains that there are several or many

oppressions and was taken aback at my suggestion that there may be just a single dynamic. I

met with her this past spring and pointedly asked her what the distinctions could be, for

example, between heterosexism, sexism and racism, her primary concerns. She said it was

simply the differing target groups. But, once again, I suggest that just because a theory

manifests variously, we should not assume that there is no unified theory.

Like Hallie, Pharr notes that oppression requires institutional power, economic and/or

political,[10] but she also includes a requirement that there be violence or the threat of violence to

maintain the submission of the target group. It is not difficult to recognize the threat of rape in

controlling the free movement and expression of women, or the fact that the National Guard is

readily available to quell uprisings and rebellions in our poverty-stricken inner cities. She

specifically names the criminal justice system and the military as the primary embodiments of

the threat of violence used to control resentful target groups.[11] The oppression of each target

group rests on what she calls "lack of prior claim." For example, the United States Constitution

was written by and for white propertied males; neither white women nor African-Americans were

deemed to have full humanity in the requisite sense. As a result, equality for these groups has

been a long, ongoing and painful struggle.   She goes on to note that when those who are

excluded in the original formation of any group wielding power seek full membership, they are

seen as disruptive trouble makers. Those struggling for their rights are the ones who are in the

wrong.[12]

Like Frye, Pharr notes that the phenomenon of "blaming the victim" is a pervasive

characteristic of oppression. She notes that "(i)n order for oppression to be thoroughly

successful, it is necessary to involve the victim in it. The victim of oppression lives in an

environment of negative images . . . backed up by violence, victim-hating and blaming, all of which leads to low self-esteem and self-blame in the victim."[13]

The psychological harm of victim-blaming leads to "internalized oppression" which Pharr says occurs when the victim of oppression comes to believe the negative views of the oppressor. The result is depression, despair and self-abuse. Internalized oppression, in turn, can lead to "horizontal hostility." If one has learned to hate oneself because of membership in a "minority" group, then that disrespect and hatred can be easily and naturally turned to the other members of the same target group. This robs the individuals and the group of hope and promise for the future. It is also safer to express hostility toward other oppressed folks than to the oppressor.[14] This, it seems to me, accounts for the highly destructive phenomenon of black-on-black violence. It may also account for the antipathy between African-Americans, Asians and Latinos.

The last two common elements of oppression I want to discuss are "assimilation" and "tokenism." It is here that a former student thinks a wedge can be driven between ableism and other forms of oppression. If he is correct, then at least in this one aspect, the possibility of a unitary theory of oppression is challenged. According to Pharr, "assimilation" occurs when persons from an oppressed target group drop their own culture and differences and adopt the attributes of the dominant paradigm. This requires "turning one's back on one's past and on one's people."[15] I think it is important to note here the distinction between assimilation and acculturation, the latter being the natural evolutionary blending of characteristics of cultures that come into contact with one another. Although many young African-Americans see speaking standard English as assimilation, calling those who do "sell outs" or "oreos," it is more likely a matter of acculturation.[16] Most educated African-Americans communicate in both dialects. When asked, students don't have much difficulty coming up with examples of assimilated people. Clarence Thomas is often mentioned first, not because he is successful but because

he has publicly turned his back on his African-American community, first by denying the value of affirmative action even though his ability to have a public voice is a result of his benefit from it and, secondly, by publicly naming and ridiculing his own sister who is on welfare. A second example of assimilation is Margaret Thatcher and, really, any other woman who, gaining a position of power, turns her back on the struggle of all women. Some feminists call these women "men in drag."

Assimilation is the first requirement for tokenism which Pharr defines as "a method of limited access that gives false hope to those left behind and blames them for 'not making it.'" Tokenism contributes to ubiquitous victim-blaming by pointing to the one or two tokens of a target group and then asking why all the others of her or his kind cannot also succeed. This form of co-optation takes the best and the brightest of target groups who have assimilated, "rewards them with position and money (though rarely genuine leadership and power), and then uses them as a model of what is necessary to succeed, even though there are often no more openings for others who may follow their model."[17]

To return to my student's observation that it is here that a unitary theory of oppression breaks down, Jim is a quite bright student who suffers from severe cerebral palsy. He is wheelchair-bound and his speech takes concentrated listening to understand. He noted in class that the charges of assimilation and tokenism are not wielded in the disabled community. He claims that if a disabled person is accepted into main stream society, finds regular employment and succeeds in gaining independence, then the community of disabled folks salutes him or her and celebrates the accomplishment. I think for the most part Jim is correct however there is a fairly well publicized exception to his claim. In the deaf community, there is a visible and vocal group who argues against hearing aids, surgery or even teaching the deaf to lip read. These activists argue that there is nothing wrong with deafness such that a person should have to learn to communicate through the spoken medium, either through hearing or

speaking. This position may represent only a small segment of the deaf community but it is quite radical in its insistence that deaf people need not join the hearing/speaking community for full development of human excellence. I don't know what to make of Jim's observation and the potential problems it presents for the possibility of a unitary theory of oppression but I am grateful for his criticism in this regard. It seems to me that it is in this way my hypothesis of a single oppression can fail.

Buber

Although not a model of oppression, Buber's distinction between I-Thou and I-It is also applicable to all forms of dominance and submission. I have found Buber quite helpful in understanding and teaching about the very possibility of oppression. The I-It perspective comes to be when we take out from a person a particular characteristic or attribute and have it stand as though it were the sum total of the person. As Buber says, "I can take out from him the colour of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time I do it he ceases to be a Thou."[18] I have adapted this aspect of Buber's theory to explain the possibility of oppression.

For oppression to exist, we must take out from a person an attribute and make this specific trait stand in front of the person as though it is all that person is. For example, if an African-American is walking down the streets of a predominantly white community, the very first thing anyone will see is the skin color and, in most cases, this "thing" is what the person becomes. This is also true of the femaleness of women. Often, being female is all a woman is considered to be, regardless of her intellect, her passionate commitments, her concerns, or anything else whatsoever. Multiple gay and lesbian students have told me that when they have come out to long time friends or, in some cases, their families, their beings shrink down to the fact of their sexual orientation and all else about them included in who they are disappears in

some significant way. A person in a wheelchair often is invisible and becomes, in effect, part of the wheelchair. An elder member of our community is all too often perceived as old and nothing more. A Jew or Moslem is often fully limited to his or her particular religious belief. This is Buber's I-It and this phenomenon creates the very possibility of oppression.

In order for oppression to exist, there must be a hierarchy, that is, a ranking of better than - less than. In order for there to be a hierarchy at all, there must be some standard of comparison. In our society, one of the most common standards of comparison is skin color and there is a definite hierarchy of value, of normalcy and deviance. The darker one's skin, the less intelligent and less moral and the further down the hierarchy one is situated when perceived on an I-It basis. It is quite interesting and important to keep in mind Buber's claim that the "I" is inseparable from the "It" or the "Thou." In other words, when one takes an attitude of "It" toward another, he or she becomes an "It" as well. For example, if one singles out skin color as the defining or only characteristic of a person, that is, if one reacts solely on the basis of race, this person becomes a racist, another "It."

By contrast, Buber's I-Thou is a relation of whole, dynamic beings. Although it is possible to list numerous attributes each of us has, even an infinite list would not say who we are. In our wholeness, we are each greater than the sum of our parts. Buber points out that "the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words nor the statue of lines."[9] As whole persons, unfragmented and unreduced, each of us is unique. Where oppression requires an I-It attitude, I-Thou logically precludes the very possibility of oppression. There is no basis on which to compare and rank a series of unique beings. If there is no hierarchy, there is no oppression. Even though, as Buber notes, we must continually take out from another parts of who they are, we can live in the awareness that each of us is, in actuality, whole, dynamic and unique. This way of regarding others is readily attainable.

<u>Consequences</u>

There are at least two main consequences of coming to see that there is just a single oppression, albeit manifested differently according to particular target groups. The first is a quasi-Marxist analysis. If each oppressed group sees itself as distinct from other oppressed groups, there is little possibility of the oppressed creating alliances to challenge their shared condition. Historically, liberation comes very slowly and at great cost when the struggle is by individual oppressed groups. However, if all target groups were to recognize their oppression in common, rather than focusing on the specifics of their particular conditions, liberatory work could be accomplished. After all, the oppressed are far greater in number than the oppressors and, in a democracy, this theoretically counts for a lot. The divisions and antipathy within and between particular oppressed groups creates resistance to seeing a common condition. Women cannot form sisterhoods because of our competition with one another, African Americans are alienated from Latinos and Asians, etc. At the very least, the presumption that racism and sexism and heterosexism, for example, are distinct and separate keeps workers pitted against one another. Is it a coincidence that this alienation benefits the dominant power group(s)?

Understanding the grave difficulty in creating alliances is an intriguing question in itself. Explanations are sometimes psychological in nature: fear is said to lie at the bottom of all the "isms." Thus, fear of different others may not be overcome by an understanding of a shared social context. Another possibility is that the dynamic of oppression itself tends to create (ostensibly) cohesive communities which are places of safety, refuge and consolation to those experiencing dominance and there is reluctance to give up this sense of community. Resistance to creation of alliances across racial and ethnic lines is also a result of the varying degrees of oppression. Even if oppression is concluded to be a single unitary phenomenon, it would not necessarily be the case that the experiences of African-Americans would be of equal

intensity as those of Latinos or the disabled or the poor. The depth of the social abuse suffered by any given target group may negatively impact their cooperation with others who, although oppressed, are subjected to less intense social harm.[20] Nevertheless, I am proposing an understanding of oppression which holds the possibilities that there can be alliances created among all peoples who are systematically dominated in society.

A second consequence of concluding that there is one oppression rather than many is its pedagogical potential. Often, formal education of students about racism begins in elementary school. Perhaps some young people are even exposed to the concept of sexism and the immorality of these two ways of singling out certain kinds of people for harmful attention or neglect. Instead of teaching about racism or sexism as independent phenomena, young people could be taught about oppression generally and, consequently, all of the target groups who suffer as a result of this social dynamic. This would permit broader conception and understanding of the multiple forms of social disadvantage. Instead of a piecemeal approach, our young community members could be brought to understand that people suffer in the ways described by Hallie and Frye on account of gender, race, sexual orientation, poverty, disabilities, age, religious beliefs, et al. From this understanding could come compassion, commitment to and actualization of necessary social change. Many of my students lament that they have had to wait until their early 20's to begin to open their eyes and see the social dynamics of the society in which they live. They believe that much younger students need to learn about how we systematically disadvantage groups of people while instituting privilege for others at the expense of the former. I challenge them to do that which they think needs to be done.

The two consequences I've discussed here, and there may be others of equal significance, are reason enough to delve into the question of oppression - whether there is one or are there many.

END NOTES

1Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality.* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1983).

2Philip Hallie, "From Cruelty to Goodness," in *Vice & Virtue in Everyday Life*, 4th ed., eds. Sommers and Sommers. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1997), 5-19. Mario Barrera also presents three theories of racism in *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality.* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

3Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism.* (Inverness, CA: Chardon Press, 1988), 53-64.

4Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power.* (Paulist Press, 1972), 16-22.

5Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 9.

6Josiah Royce, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy.* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1958), 155-156.

7Hallie, 12.

8Frye, 2.

9Ibid.

10Pharr, 53-54.

11Ibid., 55-56.

12Ibid., 57-58.

13Ibid, 59.

14Ibid., 60-61.

15Ibid., 62.

16 Other racial minorities also have names for assimilated members of their community. In the Asian community, it is "banana"; in the Latino community, those assimilated are called "coconuts", and Native Americans use the term "apple". In all cases, the inside is white and the outside is black, yellow, brown, and red.

17Pharr, 62-63.

18Buber, 9.

19Ibid., 8.

20This point is due to conversation with Professor Barbara Paige, California State University at Hayward, Department of Ethnic Studies.