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ARTICLE

Violent Resistance to Sexual Violence

Tamara Fakhoury

University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, MN, USA
Email: fakho011@umn.edu

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Abstract

Some victims of sexual violence fight back, seriously harming their abusers as a way of taking power or exacting retribution. Although violence always raises moral questions, there is nevertheless something impressive about those whose actions succeed in posing a formidable challenge to their oppression. The aim of this paper is to offer two ways of thinking about the ethical value of such non-ideal acts of resistance. First, violent resistance may allow victims to maintain ground projects that are being undermined by their abusers. Second, violent resistance may display what I call the virtue of *audacious integrity*—a willingness to take moral risks, that is, to act in ways that may arouse severe moral censure, in order to uphold one's values. Both explanations illustrate that victims of sexual abuse may choose to engage in violent resistance for a variety of ethical reasons, including but not limited to paradigmatic moral considerations.

1. The question

How should one resist an experience of sexual violence? Feminists have noted a variety of resistance methods that may be worthwhile, including verbally confronting perpetrators (Hay 2005), learning self-defense techniques (Cahill 2009), overcoming the mindset of "it's not that bad" (Gay 2018), and practicing empathy with other survivors (Burke 2018, Miller 2019). Violent resistance—where one aims to seriously harm one's abuser as a way of taking power or exacting retribution, going beyond the traditional limits of self-defense—is not usually recommended, and for good reasons. Violence is morally and physically risky.

Dr King recognized the legitimacy of violence in the case of self-defense. However, he opposed its use in the case of resistance. He believed that the goals of liberation could not be achieved through violence. Where nonviolent tactics may "bring about a transformation and change of heart" in the oppressor, violence "only multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the universe" (King 2015, 53). Indeed, there is no guarantee that violence will be successful in lessening one's oppression. Using violence against one's oppressor is extremely dangerous, especially for women and genderqueer

folks who are likely to suffer greater consequences for such actions. As legal scholar Mary Anne Franks has argued, in patriarchal societies, "men do not fear retaliation for violence against women, whereas women do fear retaliation for their use of violence against men," and this is because cis men are prepared—indeed, taught from a young age—to dole out serious consequences for violence used against them, while others are not (Franks 2016, 929). Franks argues that the lack of serious consequences for patriarchal abuse in part explains the high rates of violence against women.

To make matters worse, women and genderqueer folks are not taken seriously by the legal system and often receive harsher sentences than cis men do for the same violent behavior. In societies where "perfect victim" stereotypes abound, women who engage in violent resistance are often regarded as unworthy of sympathy and support and may even be criminalized (Goodmark 2023). Women of color are especially vulnerable to these injustices (Eltahawy 2019, 142–43).

The reality is that, regardless of the risks, some victims of sexual violence still choose to fight back. Although the use of violence always raises moral questions, there is nevertheless something impressive about those whose actions succeed in posing a formidable challenge to their oppression. The aim of this paper is to articulate what might be said in favor of such actions from an ethical point of view. More specifically, I argue that violence can be a valuable response to sexual abuse because it poses a formidable challenge to oppression. I offer two ways of thinking about the value of such non-ideal acts of resistance. First, violent resistance may allow victims to maintain ground projects that are being undermined by their abusers. Second, violent resistance may display what I call the virtue of *audacious integrity*—a willingness to take moral risks, that is, to act in ways that may arouse severe moral censure, in order to uphold one's values against oppressive forces. Both explanations illustrate that victims of sexual abuse may choose to engage in violent resistance for a variety of ethical reasons, including but not limited to paradigmatic moral considerations.

Section 2 offers clarificatory remarks that are intended to specify the scope and focus of the argument. Then, section 3 provides a presumed working definition of violent resistance for the purpose of addressing the ethical question at hand. To illustrate this phenomenon, I present two real-life cases of women who used violence against men who sexually abused them, one from Adrienne Bennett, the first Black woman master plumber in North America, and one from Egyptian feminist Mona Eltahawy. Focusing on the case of Adrienne Bennett, section 4 argues that the reasons for and against engaging in violent resistance extend beyond paradigmatic moral concerns having to do with fulfilling moral obligations and treating others as equally deserving of respect and well-being. Victims of sexual abuse may engage in violent resistance for personal reasons, as a means of maintaining their connections to ground projects that are being undermined by their abusers. Turning to the case of Mona Eltahawy, section 5 argues that violent resisters can sometimes display what I call the virtue of *audacious integrity,* which requires recognizing and being properly affected by both kinds of reasons outlined in section 4. Resisters with audacious integrity are willing to take moral risks, that is, to act in ways that may arouse blame or severe moral censure, in order to defend and uphold their values against oppressive forces.

2. Framing the discussion

Before proceeding, let me clarify how I understand morality in this paper and specify the focus of my argument. As I understand it, morality is one system of human values

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among others that bears relevantly on the fundamental ethical question "how should one live?" Thus, my inquiry assumes a distinction between ethics and morality found in the philosophical tradition notably represented by Bernard Williams (1985) and Susan Wolf (2015) (but which is seldom applied to discussions of oppression and resistance). Ethics is broadly concerned with the question of how to live a good life. Morality, as I understand it, is one dimension of ethics, more specifically concerned with the question of what we owe to others by virtue of the fact that everyone, independently of any special traits or qualities, is equally deserving of respect and well-being. Morality focuses on matters of obligation, right and wrong action, and the pursuit of impartial values like justice, equality, and the common good. Ethics, however, includes a variety of other human values alongside morality, for example, beauty, love, knowledge, strength, honor, self-realization, creativity (among others). Since doing the right thing and fulfilling our obligations is a part of living a flourishing life, morality is one important dimension of ethics. However, since there is more to living a good life than being morally good, responses to the ethical question of how to live need not appeal exclusively to considerations of morality.

The ethics–morality distinction allows us to consider how resistance may be integral to living an ethically good life and not merely a morally upstanding one. Morality does not alone decide the merits of resistance. Acts of resistance can be evaluated from the point of view of different ethical values, which may at times come into conflict. An act of resistance may be valuable from the point of view of one ethical value (e.g., from the perspective of love, self-realization, or solidarity); while it may appear flawed or imperfect from the point of view of another (e.g., from the perspective of the common good, human equality, or respect).

The scope of my investigation is limited in several important ways which should be noted at the outset. First, I will be focusing on violent resistance that is undertaken by *individuals* against sexual violence that they directly experience in their day-to-day lives. This should be contrasted with the violent resistance of those who do not experience oppression, and the violent resistance of political movements or collective agents. The arguments here do not necessarily hold in those cases, which deserve a separate discussion.

A second constraint is that the discussion here falls in the domain of ethics. I will be raising the question of the *ethical* value of individual victims' violent resistance—that is, their value from the point of view of what it means for a person to live a good life under circumstances of systemic injustice. I am asking what the use of violent resistance conveys about the life or character of an individual being subjected to sexual violence. This is distinct from the question of whether violent resistance is valuable from a political point of view. I am not, for instance, going to consider whether violent resistance is an effective way of bringing about circumstances of justice writ large, or whether such resistance is consistent with the rules and values of a democracy. That said, ethics cannot be neatly separated from politics, as responses to ethical questions often have political implications (and vice versa). How an individual chooses to respond to their oppression can reveal much about their character and what they value in life. At the same time, individual lives are shaped by the social structures they live within, and their responses to oppression can reveal much about the nature of those structures.[1] Thus, while the question at hand is ethical, the discussion will illustrate that the ethical and the political are deeply interconnected.

Third, I will be assuming, but not arguing, that violence in response to oppression is a kind of imperfect or non-ideal resistance which is always subject to moral critique.

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This is not to deny that certain restrained acts of violence may be ultimately permitted, excused, or even justified by traditional moral principles. Nor is it to say that violent resistance cannot have value despite its moral shortcomings. However, it is important to maintain that violent resistance, as I understand it, is prima facie morally questionable because it involves inflicting serious harm on another person in a context where alternative means of resistance are available. Thus, there are always moral reasons not to engage in violent resistance, even if violent resistance is deemed valuable for other reasons.

It is important to emphasize that attempting to articulate some good-making features of an action does not amount to providing an all-things-considered verdict or justification of it. Nor does it amount to encouraging or legitimizing the action more generally. By investigating the value of violent resistance for some victims of sexual violence, I am not thereby recommending that other victims engage in violent resistance or arguing that it is always good or justified for them to do so. The discussion that follows is not intended to provide action guidance or general moral policies about how, whether, or when a victim should engage in violent resistance. Nor is it intended to provide a conclusive or universal verdict on the moral status of such actions.

To be clear: the all-things-considered moral status of violent resistance will remain an open question by the end of the paper. It is not my aim to determine a policy about the legitimacy of violent resistance in general. That is, I will not argue that violent resistance is right or wrong, justifiable or unjustifiable, from the point of view of morality. Instead, I will identify two ways in which it may be valuable for some victims of sexual abuse. This value should not go unnoticed, however particularized and circumscribed it may be. However, it remains an open question how much weight the considerations I provide ought to be given in an overall evaluation, and whether the good features I identify here are diminished or cancelled out by other weightier moral-political considerations.

3. The major phenomenon: violent resistance

This section explains how I will understand "violent resistance" for the purposes of this paper.[2] I provide two real-life examples that will illustrate this phenomenon and serve as touchstones for our discussion. Along the way, I distinguish violent resistance from self-defense as it has been traditionally understood.

I will use the term violent resistance to refer to acts of resistance to oppression that aim to physically injure an oppressor or destroy their property as a way of gaining greater power or exacting retribution for oppressive treatment.[3] As a form of violence, violent resistance is likely to cause bodily injury or damage property, often through force or coercion.[4] As a form of resistance, violent resistance challenges genuinely oppressive circumstances and makes its agent vulnerable to oppression-related backlash (Fakhoury 2021, 411). Thus, violent resistance is qualitatively different from initiating violence against innocent people because it is a response to oppressive treatment. Moreover, the aims of violent resistance set it apart from self-defense.

Self-defense is a matter of protecting oneself by averting or countering a harm, using a necessary degree of force. In United States criminal law, for instance, for an action to count as self-defense, the force used must be "necessary to prevent … unlawful and immediate violence from another" (Dix 2016, 124). Moreover, there must be good reason for the agent to believe "that the harm would be inflicted immediately if she did not act" (Dix 2016, 124). Thus, when one defends oneself, one aims primarily to prevent

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imminent harm as a means of self-preservation. By contrast, violent resistance may involve using violence in a context where one has other options for resistance. It may involve inflicting greater harm than necessary for averting an imminent threat. Moreover, it may use violence preemptively, or as a form of payback after an attack. Where self-defense aims to counter or deactivate the oppressor as a means of preserving and shielding the victim, violent resistance aims to punish or coerce the oppressor as a means of empowering and strengthening the victim.[5]

Despite their apparent differences, there may be cases where the aims of violent resistance and the aims of self-defense overlap or may not be easily differentiated (such as in the case of Adrienne Bennett, which we'll turn to shortly).[6] Sometimes eliminating a threat requires overwhelming an oppressor or exacting retribution because the threat will not be countered by any other means. Moreover, when oppression targets victims' lives, such as under circumstances of genocide or slavery, acts of self-preservation may become acts of resistance.[7] As Kautzer (2018) states, "When conditions are so oppressive that one's self is not recognized at all, self-defense is de facto insurrection, a necessary making oneself known through resistance." Under such circumstances, violent resistance and self-defense may not be cleanly distinguishable. Nevertheless, there are clear cases where they do come apart, where the aim of the act of violence is not to shield the agent from harm but to gain greater power, coerce an oppressor, or exact retribution (as in the case of Mona Eltahawy, which I will discuss after the case of Adrienne Bennett).

Let's consider two cases which will serve as the foundation for our discussion. The first is an incident from the life of Adrienne Bennett. Adrienne Bennett is the first Black woman to become a master plumber in North America. In an interview with PBS, she talks about how she was subjected to near constant sexual harassment and abuse from her all-male colleagues during her five-year union plumbing apprenticeship. They did everything they could to humiliate her and sabotage her work, including putting dead rats in her lunch box, locking her in a porta john, and groping her so frequently that she wore a toolbelt purely for self-protection (Solomon and Koromvokis 2021). As Bennett stated, "like the women before me, they wanted me to leave", alluding to the fact that all the women who came before her had quit (Solomon and Koromvokis 2021). However, Bennett persisted. She went on to achieve her dream of becoming master plumber and is now CEO of her own contracting company in Detroit. As she explains in interviews, Bennett's success in her career was in large part due to her willingness to fight back against the sexual violence she experienced from her colleagues. On one notable occasion, she physically assaulted a man who groped her by striking him forcefully on the head with a pipe wrench,

> By this time, I was so tired of them putting their hands on me, I grabbed a pipe wrench out of my tool belt … I came down on top of his hardhat. And I said: It stops today. You pass the word. The next fucker that puts their hands on me will die, and I will go to prison happily. (Solomon and Koromvokis 2021)

Describing the power of her blow, she stated, "I literally split that hard hat in half. I could have killed him, but I didn't have any more problems after that" (*NowThis News* 2019). Bennett describes the resistance she engaged in during this time as stemming from her dedication to achieving the highest credentials of master plumber, "I'm honest, hardworking, and I don't let anyone get in my way and cheat me out of my dream" (Kavilanz 2018). Indeed, as she reports, her act of violent resistance helped her complete

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her apprenticeship by putting a stop to the harassment she was receiving. It sent a powerful message to her colleagues that she was willing to dole out serious consequences for their misogynistic abuse. Sending such a message shifted the balance of power to her advantage. As she stated, "I didn't have any more problems after that."

For a second example of violent resistance, consider an incident from the life of Egyptian feminist writer Mona Eltahawy. Eltahawy reports being sexually harassed on numerous occasions, including once during a religious pilgrimage, and once while she was a child.[8] In the past, she responded by turning the other cheek. Now in her fifties, she is determined to, as she puts it, "terrify the patriarchy." On one occasion, she used violence that went beyond the traditional limits of self-defense to humiliate a man who groped her on the dance floor. She describes the incident in her book:

> I felt a hand on my ass ... I immediately spotted my creep, who had started to walk away ... I followed him and tugged so hard at the back of his shirt that he stumbled. When he fell, I sat on top of him and I punched and punched his face. Once was not enough. (Eltahawy 2019, 4)

Explaining her motivations she states,

> Like so many women, I knew—because I had been subjected to it for years—that men believe they can do as they like to our bodies without consequences. That was why I did not want to stop punching that man. I wanted him to remember that this average height woman, whose ass he believed he could just reach out and grope without fear of retaliation, beat the fuck out of him. I wanted him to wonder—if he ever dared again to want to grope a woman—if she, too, would beat the fuck out of him ... I simply want men to know that women can dole out consequences. (Eltahawy 2019, 142)

Afterwards, Eltahawy posted about the incident on Twitter, launching the hashtag #IBeatMyAssaulter and inspiring countless others to share their stories of retaliation against misogynistic abuse. She transformed what could have been a humiliating moment into one that filled her with a renewed sense of her own strength and created the opportunity for other victims to celebrate their triumphs over their assailants.

In sum, violent resistance involves physically injuring an oppressor or destroying their property as a means of gaining greater power or exacting retribution for oppressive treatment. Its characteristic aims go beyond the traditional goals of self-defense, which are typically limited to averting or countering harm through necessary and proportionate force. Unlike standard cases of self-defense, violent resistance may involve inflicting more harm than is strictly required to neutralize an immediate threat. It may also be employed preemptively or used as retribution after an attack. What distinguishes violent resistance from mere violence—and marks it as a form of resistance—is that it challenges genuinely oppressive situations and entails the risk of backlash—including the possibility of further harm inflicted by oppressors. Despite these distinctions, there may be cases in which the aims of violent resistance and self-defense overlap or blur, and some acts of self-defense may also constitute acts of resistance. With this working definition and the examples from Bennett and Eltahawy at hand, we are now ready to explore what can be said in favor of such actions from an ethical point of view.

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4. Adrienne Bennett and the personal value of violent resistance

One way to approach the question of the value of violent resistance to sexual violence is to consider the kinds of normative reasons that victims may have for (and against) engaging in it. There are two kinds of reasons that may be relevant here (permitting overlap and gray area): *paradigmatic moral reasons,* which generally have to do with fulfilling our moral obligations and treating others as equally deserving of respect and well-being, and *personal reasons*, which generally have to do with maintaining and pursuing the special projects and relationships that make our lives worth living (Fakhoury 2023). After briefly explaining the distinction, this section draws from the case of Adrienne Bennett to argue that victims of sexual violence may have personal reasons to engage in violent resistance.[9] That is, they may engage in violent resistance as a means of maintaining their connections to ground projects that are being undermined by their abusers. I'll start by explaining paradigmatic moral reasons.

Paradigmatic moral reasons are impartial reasons arising from commitments to abstract principles of justice and morality (e.g., human dignity, equality, the collective good). They tend to be concerned with paradigmatically moral matters such as the difference between right and wrong action, the grounds and limits of our moral obligations, or protecting and promoting the equally weighted needs and interests of others in society. They are characteristically impartial, applying to individuals in virtue of their shared moral status, independently of any special traits or qualities. Moreover, paradigmatic moral reasons often reflect the fact that each of us is just one person among others equally deserving of respect and well-being. Reasons of this sort are most explicitly represented in traditional moral theories such as deontology and consequentialism. Moreover, they often take the form of broad requirements or limitations on action—for instance, by stating a duty to respect a basic principle (e.g., human dignity) or to promote a certain good (e.g., collective happiness).[10]

What are some concrete examples of paradigmatic moral reasons that bear relevantly on violent resistance? Discussions of the value of violent resistance focus overwhelmingly on parsing these reasons. Thus, the literature provides myriad examples.[11] Philosophers defending certain kinds of violent protest have argued, for instance, that violent protests can eliminate injustices in public policy and institutions (Pasternak 2019; Delmas 2018), enhance public communication over injustices (Kling and Mitchell 2019), allow victims to affirm their self-respect (Boxill 2018), and defend moral principles of dignity and equality (Boxill 2018; Betz 2020). Conversely, philosophers offering paradigmatic moral reasons against the use of violence emphasize, for instance, that even justified violence can beget further violence and injustice, erode the possibility of establishing peace and justice writ large, and potentially cause greater harm than good for society in general (Brownlee 2004; Raz 1979).

Paradigmatic moral reasons have received a great amount of attention in the literature. However, they are not the only kinds of reasons that may motivate and explain the value of violent resistance. There are also what I call *personal reasons*—reasons that arise from victims' commitments to special projects. I use the term "projects" in a broad sense which includes the activities, vocations, relationships, and other engagements that a person cares about and that may shape the meaning and quality of her life.[12] Personal reasons are characteristically partial. They apply to individuals in virtue of special engagements and commitments which they may not share with others and which may not be reasonably expected of everyone. Love for a special person, the pursuit of a sport, the call to continue a family legacy, and the desire

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to cause the suffering of an enemy are all examples of personal reasons. Thus, what draws personal reasons apart from paradigmatic moral reasons is their personal and partial nature. [13]

The distinction between paradigmatic moral reasons and personal reasons allows us to see that the value of violent resistance may not be exhausted by paradigmatic moral concerns. Since personal reasons may also stand in favor of (or against) engagement in violent resistance, there is also something to be said for the *personal value* of such actions–that is, their value from the point of view of an individual's projects.

To see how one may have personal reasons to engage in violent resistance against sexual violence, it helps to note that sexual violence is a form of misogynistic hostility which functions to obstruct, and often completely severs, an individual's ties to her projects. Victims of sexual abuse may be restricted in their ability to have projects of their own, or they may be compelled to pursue projects that only serve to further their oppression. Moreover, by creating circumstances in which people are focused largely on surviving and avoiding harm, contexts where sexual violence is pervasive prevent people from engaging in the kind of play and experimentation that would allow them to develop projects of their own, especially when this involves going against patriarchal norms. Moreover, sexual violence can deter women and genderqueer individuals from participating in projects that have been historically cis-male-dominated and it punishes those who choose to pursue them anyway. This is especially relevant to Adrienne Bennett's story.

As we saw in Bennett's testimony, all the women plumbing apprentices before her had quit because of their experiences with sexual abuse on the job. Indeed, the skilled trades are notoriously male-dominated and sexual harassment is a major factor in why women choose to leave these professions. A 2021 study from the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that women make up only 4% of all workers in the skilled trades (96% are men and 66% are white).[14] Nearly 50% of tradeswomen say they are considering leaving their jobs because of their experiences with sexual harassment and the lack of effective institutional protection.[15] These women are otherwise happy with their professions, many of which are well-paid and offer some degree of social mobility (Cohen 2020).

When one's ability to pursue a project of significant personal importance is being regularly undermined by sexual violence (or the standing threat of it), one may have a personal reason to resist in a manner that would allow one to continue to pursue their project. As we saw in the case of Adrienne Bennett, sometimes circumstances of oppression are so severe that this requires one to engage in violence.

Bennett's testimony suggests that among the reasons for assaulting the man who harassed her—striking him on the head as he was walking away and breaking his hardhat—were strong personal reasons arising from her loyalty to herself and to the career that she had devoted her life to. Although acting on that personal reason was risky, it ultimately allowed her to achieve her personal goal of completing her apprenticeship. As she put it, she "didn't have any more problems after that." Thus, independently of how her act measures up from an impartial moral point of view, it should be noted that it had significant personal value by allowing her to go on in her career, oppression notwithstanding.

I have been arguing that paradigmatic moral reasons (e.g., those having to do with impartial ideals of justice and the common good) are not the only reasons that victims may have to fight back against their abusers. There are also personal reasons such as the desire to stand up for and maintain one's ties to their projects. For Adrienne Bennett, for

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instance, the desire to successfully pursue a career in the skilled trades served as a compelling personal reason for her to violently resist her colleague.

It is important to note, however, that the mere fact that personal reasons might count in favor of violent resistance for some victims of sexual violence does not dictate whether one *should* act on those reasons, all things considered. Indeed, such personal reasons may not be decisive for everyone and may be outweighed by other moral or practical considerations. I will not offer guidance for making such decisions here. Nor will I justify or recommend violent resistance to sexual violence. Instead, I have been making the much weaker point that some of the normative considerations that go into the balance when deliberating about whether to engage in it are personal reasons, and such reasons can hold independently of, and are not guaranteed to cohere with, reasons of impartial morality. Regardless of what we ultimately think agents facing such situations should do, recognizing the variety of reasons that may favor violence and the ethical conflicts that may occur for those who must make the decision to engage in it is crucial for understanding the circumstances that give rise to violent resistance and standing in solidarity with victims when solidarity is appropriate.

5. Mona Eltahawy and the virtue of audacious integrity

Another way to think about the value of violent resistance to sexual violence is to consider whether such actions exemplify any virtues—that is, cultivated dispositions that, when performed well, are conducive to living a good and meaningful life. In the previous section I made a distinction between two kinds of reasons that may stand in favor of (and against) engaging in violent resistance to sexual violence: paradigmatic moral reasons and personal reasons. In this section, I suggest that violent resisters can sometimes display what I call the virtue of *audacious integrity,* which requires being disposed to recognize and be properly affected by both kinds of reasons (moral and personal) when deliberating about whether to engage in morally risky behavior. In what follows, I explain audacious integrity and show how it was exemplified by Mona Eltahawy when she beat up the man who groped her in a club.

As the label would suggest, audacious integrity is a special kind of integrity which is audacious, or morally fraught (and thus requires defense as a kind of *virtuous* integrity). [16] It is constituted by a willingness to take moral risks, that is, to act in ways that may arouse serious moral censure (herein lies the audacity) in order to stand up for one's values for good reasons, moral or personal (herein lies the integrity). Put differently, the agent with audacious integrity is willing to stand for something valuable that matters to them, even if taking such a stand means making themselves vulnerable to serious moral criticism (from themselves or others).[17] For them, the possibility that they could come to deserve blame or moral censure is not a sufficient reason to refrain from standing up for something that they value.

Like other virtues, audacious integrity requires being disposed to take moral risks *for good reasons.* By "for good reasons" I simply mean reasons having to do with upholding values that agent sincerely holds, and that may include but are not limited to paradigmatic moral reasons. In audacious integrity, moral risks are not taken randomly, carelessly, or for arbitrary, ill-informed, or insignificant reasons. Moreover, the agent's willingness to take moral risks does not reflect a nihilistic denial of moral value or mere lack of concern for moral principles. Nor does it constitute behavior that is self-destructive or narcissistic. Rather, their morally risky acts stem from a commitment to

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protecting and upholding a variety of values (moral and personal) which are important to them, and which they will not allow to be undermined by oppression.[18]

We can think of a resister in whom audacious integrity is a virtue as aiming at a middle ground between two extremes. On one end of the spectrum, we have *moral nihilism* about resistance—complete rejection of moral values in resistance deliberations. The nihilist believes that moral values have no place in guiding resistance practices. They thrust the entire practice of morality aside, regarding it as inherently repressive or antagonistic to their liberatory goals. For the nihilist, there are no moral constraints on the use of violence against sexual abuse (although, they may recognize practical or political restrictions). The question of whether to use violence against sexual abuse is entirely a question of whether such an act would effectively bring about the nihilist's personal aims (as opposed to whether violence would be supported by paradigmatic moral reasons). The nihilist is simply unaffected by impartial moral values, allowing them to play no significant role in governing their attitudes or behaviors.

On the other end of the spectrum we have *moral purism,* or an excessive concern for moral rules and preserving the moral purity of one's actions in resistance deliberations. The moral purist believes that one should strive for moral perfection when resisting their oppression. They strongly discourage morally risky actions, such as the use of violence beyond the limits of self-defense. One's primary aim should be to keep one's record clean, never dirtying one's hands, even to make a formidable challenge to an oppressive situation.[19] For the purist, moral values are the only values that bear relevantly on the question of whether to engage in violent resistance. They are not deeply affected by personal considerations simpliciter and are always ready to sacrifice or constrain their special projects and relationships for the sake of upholding a moral principle. For the purist, when conflicts occur between impartial moral reasons and personal reasons, morality is always decisive.

The person with audacious integrity lies between the extremes of moral nihilism and moral purism with respect to resistance. Rather than completely rejecting the authority of moral reasons, they recognize that morality has an important role to play in guiding their actions against oppression. They understand that there are strong reasons to uphold moral principles and abide by moral guidelines in resistance practices. At the same time, however, they are willing to get their hands dirty. They recognize that oppression places substantial material, psychological, and epistemological limits on one's ability to be perfectly moral.[20] Sometimes, the morally best course of action is impossible, inadequate, or simply unclear.[21] Under oppression, it may not always be better to be *morally* better. Someone with the trait of audacious integrity excels at recognizing when that is the case. They are skilled in seeing when one may have to push the limits of morality (e.g., by using violence) for the sake of defending and upholding other human values which may be compromised by oppression.

Put simply, where the nihilist denies the authority of moral values in resistance deliberations, the purist is unconditionally committed to them. They allow moral principles to reign supreme over all of their other ethical commitments. By contrast, the person with audacious integrity appreciates and is properly affected by a variety of ethical values when deliberating about resistance, including but not limited to paradigmatic moral values. They do not deny that moral principles have some authority to guide and constrain their actions. At the same time, however, they do not regard their values as existing in a hierarchy with morality at the top.[22] They are not unconditionally committed to morality. Rather, they are willing to dirty their hands for good reasons.

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Namely, reasons having to do with protecting and upholding a variety of human values which may be undermined by oppressive forces.

To possess audacious integrity, one must be adept at recognizing the ethically salient features of different situations (moral and personal) and be proficient at giving different reasons proper weight in deliberation. In cases where values conflict, the person with audacious integrity chooses which value to sacrifice in a manner that displays practical wisdom. That is, they know when it is appropriate to give moral values greater weight than personal projects, or when to sacrifice one moral value to uphold another which is more important. Conversely, they know when it is appropriate to give personal projects greater weight than moral values, or when one should sacrifice one personal project for another which is more important. Likewise, they can discern when circumstances are such that one's actions should be determined exclusively by moral reasons, or exclusively by personal reasons. In sum, they are disposed to recognize and be properly affected by a variety of human values and they are practically wise with respect to deciding what to do when conflicts arise.

To be clear, I have been stating that audacious integrity requires the *disposition* to recognize and be properly affected by both moral and personal reasons. This is not to say, however, that both kinds of reasons must necessarily factor into the motivations behind every action in which the virtue is displayed. Audacious integrity does not require that a person always act from or consider acting from personal reasons. Audacious integrity may be displayed in actions where the agent exclusively considers and acts on paradigmatically moral reasons. For example, there may be situations in which the only good reasons for (or against) a morally risky act (e.g., violence) are paradigmatic moral reasons. In such situations, the virtuous agent will set personal considerations aside. Indeed, it is part and parcel of the virtue of audacious integrity to be able to discern when this should be done. Nevertheless, even when the agent exclusively considers moral reasons for taking a moral risk, there can be moral ambiguity and so serious risk of moral censure because of the conflicting moral values that are at stake. Importantly, however, unlike the moral purist, the person with audacious integrity is not *unconditionally* committed to morality. They may consider moral reasons to be decisive and even exclusively important in certain situations, but they are not committed to giving morality decisive power or supreme importance in all cases.

Acts of resistance that display audacious integrity allow resisters to make formidable challenges to their oppression. There are multiple ways that an agent may pose a formidable challenge to their oppression. For instance, the agent may transform a potentially humiliating situation into a meaningful experience for them or other oppressed persons. By meaningful experience I mean an experience which is, for instance, cathartic, strengthening, mobilizing, enlightening, or liberating. Moreover, an action may pose a formidable challenge to oppression by allowing the agent to push back against multiple features of an oppressive situation at once. Later, I will show how Eltahawy's violent resistance posed a formidable challenge to patriarchy in both of these ways.

Finally, I am focused here on describing how audacious integrity is displayed through acts of resistance to oppression (and through violent resistance in particular). This is not to say, however, that audacious integrity is a virtue which is exclusively demonstrated in acts of resistance; it can also be displayed in actions which do not constitute resistance. Likewise, audacious integrity is not unique to violent resistance and can also facilitate certain acts of nonviolent resistance. A case can be made, for instance, that the actions of the Civil Rights Movement, which were steadfastly nonviolent, also displayed the virtue of audacious integrity.

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Now, let's see how audacious integrity can play out in a real-life situation. Mona Eltahawy displayed audacious integrity when she, a then 50-year-old woman of average build, dared to use serious violence against a man who groped her in a club. Eltahawy displayed *audacity* by taking a serious moral risk. Namely, she chose to use violence in a context where violence was neither necessary to defend her life, nor was it the only viable means of resisting her harasser. Thus, she acted in a way that made her vulnerable to severe moral censure. Indeed, she has been blamed for inciting violence and criticized for the intensity of her retaliation, "You made too much of a fuss. You were too violent. Don't you think you overreacted?" (Barry 2021).

Moreover, Eltahawy displayed the kind of integrity which is characteristic of audacious integrity. Eltahawy took a moral risk for good reasons, that is, reasons fundamentally having to do with her values. Her violent behavior was not an unpremeditated or uncontrolled outburst. Rather, it reflected her best assessment of the oppressive situation which she faced and what would be required of her to overcome it. Violent resistance was Eltahawy's way of taking her views about patriarchal oppression seriously and standing by them in her actions. To see how, let's take a closer look at her motivations.

Eltahawy defends her behavior in her (2019) book, citing research by legal scholar Mary Anne Franks on strategies for ameliorating the epidemic of male violence against women. Franks reports that, while both men and women use violence against each other, men's violence against women is "far more common, less justified, and more destructive" (2016, 929). This asymmetry is in part because, "men do not fear retaliation for violence against women, whereas women do fear retaliation for their use of violence against men" (Franks 2016, 929). Indeed, women suffer far greater consequences for using violence against patriarchal abusers. Not only are they more likely to be overpowered, but they are not taken seriously by the legal system and receive harsher sentences than men do for the same behavior. These consequences are amplified for women of color (Eltahawy 2019, 142–43).

In light of these asymmetries, Franks goes on to make the following provocative proposal, which Eltahawy accepts,

> Men's disproportionate willingness and ability to use violence against women must be countered, at least in part, by increasing women's willingness and ability to use violence against men … This is not merely a question of justice but of social efficiency; the more women make use of responsive … violence against men, the less men will make use of unjustified violence against women … More controversially, perhaps … an increase in women's violence and aggression must be tolerated even if such violence violates traditional proportionality principles in individual instances. (Franks 2016, 933, quoted in Eltahawy 2019, 144–45).

Others who find this proposal compelling may not be willing to implement it themselves. Eltahawy displayed audacious integrity because she actually stood by her convictions, allowing them to guide her actions despite various risks and uncertainties.

It is important to note, however, that Eltahawy's motivations were not nihilistic. She did not reject morality completely or fail to consider it in her deliberations. Her motivations for using violence included clear moral reasons, namely, she used violence to make a statement about patriarchal abuse, to empower women, and lessen violence against them. However, she decided, based on her best judgement about the nature of

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patriarchal oppression, that her aims would be best brought about through morally risky behavior which violated widely accepted principles of nonviolence. Thus, although she had strong moral aims, she was willing to get her hands dirty to achieve them, thereby forging a middle path between moral nihilism and moral purism in her resistance.

Recall that another characteristic feature of resistance actions that display audacious integrity is that they pose formidable challenges to oppression. For instance, they may allow an agent to transform an encounter with oppression into a more meaningful experience. Moreover, they may allow the agent to push back against multiple features of their oppression at once. Eltahawy's violent resistance challenged oppression in both ways. Let me explain.

First, Eltahawy transformed what would otherwise have been a humiliating experience into one that was empowering for her and which created the opportunity for expressions of solidarity between her and others who have experienced sexual violence. Recall how afterwards, she posted about the incident on Twitter, launching #IBeatMyAssaulter and inspiring countless others to share their stories of retaliation against misogynistic abuse.

> All that weekend I was icing my bruised knuckles and hearing from women around the world who sent me their #IBeatMyAssaulter experiences; a global chorus of women who saw each other and recognized what it means to be done with the fuckery of patriarchy … This is putting patriarchy on notice that we will fight back. This is warning patriarchy that it should fear us. (Eltahawy 2021)

Second, Eltahawy's action posed a formidable challenge to her oppression by pushing back against multiple features of her oppression at once. Namely, (1) patriarchy's monopoly over violence, (2) the lack of serious consequences for misogyny, and (3) the patriarchal protection racket. Let's consider each one in turn.

Patriarchy's monopoly over violence.

Under patriarchy, women are regularly subjected to violence while being taught that they should never be violent in return (unless it promotes patriarchal interests). People are taught that it is in men's nature to be violent, and women's nature to be fearful and submissive. As Eltahawy writes, "it is as if men have hoarded the operating manual for violence and, from boyhood, have been taught the language of that manual, while girls and women are kept illiterate" (2019, 136).[23] By using violence to transform what would have been a humiliating moment into one that was empowering, Eltahawy directly challenged patriarchy's monopoly over the use of violence. By using it to give a voice to women's triumphs over their abusers, she contradicted the norm that violence is a tool reserved exclusively for patriarchal use.

The lack of serious consequences for misogyny

Under patriarchy, there is a deeply engrained assumption that there will be no serious consequences for misogynistic actions. Women are considered weak and incapable of making men pay a significant price for their abuse. By beating her assaulter, Eltahawy showed that women *are* prepared to make men pay for misogynistic aggression. Indeed, this was part of her motivation for punching her assaulter forcibly and repeatedly, instead of stopping after one small strike. As she writes,

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> Like so many women, I knew—because I had been subjected to it for years—that men believe they can do as they like to our bodies without consequences. That was why I did not want to stop punching that man … I wanted him to wonder—if he ever dared again to want to grope a woman—if she, too, would beat the fuck out of him … I simply want men to know that women can dole out consequences. (Eltahawy 2019, 142)

The patriarchal protection racket

Patriarchy "protects" women insofar as they abide by its rules.[24] Moreover, it says that, if a man has wronged a woman, the woman should not attempt to resolve the conflict herself, but rather seek the help and protection of a male guardian (such as a spouse, father, or son). Eltahawy defied the patriarchal protection racket by taking matters into her own hands. This is clear from the reactions of witnesses. Knowing that she intended to stand up for herself, Eltahawy's partner blocked two men from intervening on the situation, informing them that, "she's got this." Moreover, after she explained to the disturbed club manager that she beat her assaulter, the manager immediately looked at her partner and asked, "Why didn't you let your husband take care of it"?[25]

In sum, Mona Eltahawy displayed audacious integrity by beating up the man who groped her in a club. By using violence against her harasser, she displayed a willingness to take moral risks in order to stand by her convictions about eliminating male violence against women. Moreover, her actions posed a formidable challenge to patriarchal oppression. She created the opportunity for victims of sexual abuse to celebrate their triumphs over their assailants and defied multiple aspects of patriarchal oppression at once.

6. Conclusion

Some victims of sexual violence fight back, seriously harming their abusers as a way of taking power or exacting retribution. The aim of this paper has been to show that violence can serve as a valuable response to sexual abuse, insofar as it constitutes a formidable challenge to oppression. I offered two frameworks for understanding the value of such non-ideal acts of resistance. Drawing on an incident from the life of Adrienne Bennett, I argued that victims of sexual abuse may resort to violent resistance not only for paradigmatic moral reasons, but also to preserve deeply held ground projects that are being threatened or undermined by their abusers. Looking carefully at a case from the life of Mona Eltahawy, I argued that violent resisters can sometimes display what I call the virtue of *audacious integrity,* which requires recognizing and being properly affected by both kinds of reasons (moral and personal). Resisters with audacious integrity are willing to take moral risks, that is, to act in ways that may arouse blame or severe moral censure, in order to uphold their values against oppressive forces. Both explanations illustrate that victims of sexual abuse may have a variety of ethical reasons to engage in violent resistance, including but not limited to paradigmatic moral considerations.

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Notes

1 Many thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting the addition of these points.

2 As a reminder, the central aim of this paper is to articulate what can be said in favor of certain acts of violent resistance to sexual violence. The aim is not to address the question of how to define the concept of violent resistance and which acts should fall under its scope. Thus, the purpose of this section is not to provide a comprehensive theoretical account of violent resistance, but to offer a presumed working definition for the purpose of addressing the ethical question at hand.

3 Thus, I am using the term as it is used in Fakhoury (2023). As defined there, violent resistance "aims to harm and overwhelm an oppressor as a way of gaining power or exacting retribution for oppressive treatment" (5). Unlike self-defense, its aims go beyond self-preservation. The violent resister "may use greater force than that which is necessary to merely counteract or eliminate a threat" and they may use violence "as a form of payback for an oppressive harm that has passed" (Fakhoury 2023, 5).

4 This is not to say, however, that all violent actions succeed in injuring bodies or damaging property. Here I lean on Rawls's (1999, 321) understanding of violence as including "acts likely to injure and to hurt" and Singer's (1973, 83) understanding of violence as "intimidatory and coercive." However, this is not to say that *all* forms of violence are coercive or that violence is coercive by definition. There may be instances of violence that do not coerce others. For examples, see Brownlee (2004, 349).

5 It is beyond the scope of the paper to engage in the controversy over how to define self-defense. It is worth noting, however, that there is a literature which questions standard definitions. See, e.g., Fishback (2016), Ferzan (2004), and Statman (2008). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for noting these sources.

6 See Fakhoury (2023) for further discussion of such cases.

7 Consider for instance Jews who survived the Holocaust, as discussed by Frankl (2006). A similar point is made by Lorde (1984) with respect to Black women's survival in racist societies.

8 Discussion of these incidents can be found in Eltahawy (2019) and in a series of posts in her blog "Feminist Giant."

9 In-depth discussion of the *moral* reasons in favor of (and against) such actions can be found in Fakhoury (2023). This issue is set aside here in the interest of focusing on the personal reasons.

10 This conception of paradigmatic moral reasons is inspired by the characterization of morality found in Wolf (2015), Frankfurt (2004), and Williams's (1985).

11 See especially Betz (2020), Delmas (2018), Kling and Mitchell (2019), and Pasternak (2019).

12 Thus, I'm using the term much like Wolf (2015) does.

13 The personal value of an action may certainly cohere with its moral value, but there is not guarantee that it will. For instance, there may be cases where an agent deliberating about how to resist her oppression is pulled in opposite directions, with paradigmatic moral reasons urging one kind of action and personal reasons urging another (Fakhoury 2023). Under such conditions, an agent may have to make a difficult choice between fulfilling the demands of impartial morality and upholding her personal projects and relationships. Both options may come with substantial costs.

14 "The Trade World's Big Sexist Pipeline Problem" (https://thestoryexchange.org/the-trade-worlds-big-sexist-pipeline-problem); the demographics are also cited in Zippia (https://www.zippia.com/tradesman-jobs/demographics).

15 Institute for Women's Policy Research "New tradeswomen survey shows that construction industry needs to tackle discrimination and harassment to retain women" (https://iwpr.org/new-tradeswomen-survey-shows-that-construction-industry-needs-to-tackle-discrimination-and-harassment-to-retain-women-oregon-initiatives-show-how/; here is the survey: https://iwpr.org/a-future-worth-building-report).

16 While it combines elements of two distinct traits, audacious integrity cannot be reduced to audacity alone nor can it be reduced to integrity alone. Audacity alone is not virtuous. Indeed, it may be possessed by a moral nihilist (someone who denies moral value). Integrity alone may be virtuous, but it is not necessarily audacious, and so does not fully capture the attitude displayed in acts of violent resistance like Bennett's and Eltahawy's.

17 McBride (2021) and Harris (2020) both mention audacity when they list the insurrectionist virtues (or traits that facilitate resistance). However, neither defines audacity or provides a sustained discussion of it and its ethical features.

18 I will not provide a standard that can be used to generate what counts as a good reason to take a moral risk. This is in part because what counts as a good reason will be highly context-specific and will differ

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depending on the agent's individual traits and qualities. Thus, much like Aristotle, I do not believe an adequate standard can be stated in advance and free of context (Aristotle 2014, Nicomachean Ethics, 1104a1–10). However, we may expect good reasons to reflect the enhanced ethical perception of the agent and their genuine care for the values which they seek to uphold against countervailing forces. Moreover, bad reasons may include those that reflect falsities, malice, arrogance, lack of care for others, or an excessive preoccupation with appearances or one's moral superiority.

19 A version of the moral purist is discussed in Hill (1983). However, Hill's discussion focuses on the moral justifiability of choosing the lesser evil to promote a greater good. Moreover, he does not consider how such situations may arise in the context of resistance to oppression.

20 Card (1996, 2000), Tessman 2014), and Calhoun (2016) discuss these limits at length.

21 Regina Rini (2020) touches on the way oppression can create situations of moral ambiguity, calling on us to question the need for final moral verdicts.

22 Wolf (2015) describes such an attitude outside of a context of oppression.

23 Manne (2018) also discusses how, in patriarchal societies, violence is often considered to be the sole prerogative of men. She presents violence as one form of misogynistic harm (among many others) which women are subjected to for actual or perceived violations of patriarchal norms. Thanks are owed to an anonymous reviewer for noting this connection to Manne's work.

24 For in-depth discussion of the patriarchal protection racket, see especially chapter 5 in Card (1996).

25 Eltahawy discusses these responses in her blog post (2021)

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Tamara Fakhoury is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Minnesota. Her research explores the ethics and moral psychology of resisting oppression. Her recent work examines a range of under-theorized resistance practices, including what she calls *Quiet Resistance*, and the morally fraught conditions from which such practices often emerge. Her publications include "Wadi climbing: Quiet resistance in the West Bank," in *The Radical Philosophy Review,* "Non-normative behavior and the virtue of rebelliousness," in *Journal of Value Inquiry,* and "Violent resistance as radical choice," in *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly.*

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