

## ***Groups and Oppression***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Oppression* is a form of injustice that occurs when one social group is subordinated while another is privileged, and oppression is maintained by a variety of different mechanisms including social norms, stereotypes and institutional rules. A key feature of oppression is that it is perpetrated by and affects *social groups*. In this paper I show that because of the central role that groups play in theories of oppression, those theories face significant, and heretofore mostly unrecognized, metaphysical problems. I then identify resources from analytic metaphysics that can be used to address these problems. I show that, although we should not be pessimistic about the prospects for a viable theory of oppression, it will take serious metaphysical work to develop a plausible ontology of oppression, and existing theories have for the most part failed to respond to this challenge.

### ***What is Oppression?***

Many feminists and other theorists concerned about social justice have argued that a grasp of the concept of *oppression* is essential if we are to understand a unique social phenomenon. That phenomenon occurs when a particular social group is unjustly subordinated, and where that subordination is not necessarily deliberate but instead results from a complex network of social restrictions, ranging from laws and institutions to implicit biases and stereotypes. In such cases, there may be no deliberate attempt to subordinate the relevant group, but the group is nonetheless unjustly subordinated by this network of social constraints. <1>

For illustration, consider the following examples:

- Cultural practices that impose unfair burdens on one social group while advantaging another group or groups are commonly thought to be oppressive. For example, many have argued that cultural practices concerning gender norms of childcare, housework, appearance and career impose an unfair burden on women and as such are oppressive. (Haslanger 2012, 315)
- Cultural practices that foster negative stereotypes of particular groups can be oppressive. Such stereotypes are not only insulting to those group members but can also generate further harms, such as perpetuating false beliefs and judgments about the relevant group. (Haslanger 2012, 315) For example, cultural practices that reinforce an association between young black men and violence are commonly thought to be oppressive for these reasons.
- In many industries such as publishing, film and design, it is difficult to secure a paid position without taking on at least one unpaid internship, and a standard way to secure a job in these industries is to work for free for a substantial amount of time. This practice unfairly disadvantages those who are not wealthy, creates a disproportionate advantage for the wealthy and hampers social mobility, and as such could reasonably be argued to be oppressive.

In such cases injustice can develop without a deliberate intention to disadvantage the relevant group. For example, those offering unpaid internships typically regard them as good opportunities for ambitious young people, and would be surprised to discover that their provision of such opportunities could contribute to disadvantage. As we can see in these examples, oppression is a complex social phenomenon, and is maintained by a variety of different people through a variety of different mechanisms, ranging from institutional rules, workplace codes and laws to stereotypes, customs and attitudes. In the past, the term “oppression” was given a narrower definition, meaning “the unjust subordination of subjects by a ruler or rulers”. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however,

the concept underwent some significant changes and theorists now use it to describe these more subtle, complex and systemic instances of injustice. <2>

Across different accounts of oppression it is a standard, shared commitment that oppression involves groups. The target of oppression is a group, the entities privileged by oppression are also groups, and individuals are marked or picked out for the oppressive treatment in virtue of their group memberships. Many theories of oppression also appear to require groups to interact, and to cause effects on other groups and on individuals. The fact that oppression involves groups is one factor that oppression theorists argue makes it very different from other approaches to injustice. Oppression theorists have argued that we *need* to appeal to groups in order to fully account for certain kinds of injustice, and that concepts such as discrimination fail to account for these phenomena because they do not recognize the role of groups either as targets or agents of injustice. And yet, this group element raises some difficult questions. Are oppression theorists ontologically committed to groups or should we understand their talk of groups instrumentally? If oppression theorists are committed to groups, what is the relationship between these groups and the individuals that form them? Do groups cause effects, and if so how? The challenge of answering these (among other) questions amounts to the challenge of formulating a plausible ontology of oppression.

Some authors have begun to address these questions. Iris Marion Young, for example, holds that groups are ontologically over and above the individuals that compose them, while Ann Cudd recognizes groups only as explanatory posits. (Young 1990, 45; Cudd 2006, 33 and 46) However, once we attempt to fully flesh out the metaphysical commitments of certain oppression theories we will see that they still face problems, and that more work is needed to clearly articulate and defend the metaphysical role that groups are playing in those theories. This challenge applies both to

analytic and continental theories of oppression, although this discussion will mostly focus on analytic theories. Thankfully, however, there are significant resources that oppression theorists can use in this work, particularly from contemporary metaphysics.

In the rest of this paper, I will examine three different theories of oppression and will offer a metaphysical interpretation of each theory, describing what the theory appears to be committed to with respect to groups, such as how groups are related to individuals and whether groups are causally efficacious. Then, I will describe certain problems generated by the metaphysical role of groups for each theory, and finally will identify certain resources from contemporary metaphysics that oppression theorists can use to address these problems.

Before beginning, however, we must recognize the important distinction between *individualist* and *nonindividualist* theories of oppression. Individualist theories recognize only individuals, while nonindividualist theories recognize social groups. This is often described as the distinction between *liberal* and *nonliberal* theories of oppression, but I use the term *individualist* instead because *liberal* is a very rich term in political philosophy, and only the ontological element of liberalism is relevant to this discussion. This distinction is a topic of significant disagreement among oppression theorists, as some argue that there can be no successful individualist theories of oppression, while others argue that an individualist social theory can accommodate oppression. As we will discover, giving a plausible ontology of oppression is of great relevance to this debate. Although it is not my goal to argue for or against any particular theory of oppression, it is clear that the capacity of any oppression theorist to develop a plausible ontology should, along with other factors, play a role in our evaluation of oppression theories.

### ***Position 1: Explanatory Individualism***

The first view I will consider is Ann Cudd's theory of oppression. Cudd argues that the following conditions are jointly necessary and sufficient for oppression:

*The harm condition: There is a harm that comes out of an institutional practice.*

*The social group condition: The harm is perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group.*

*The privilege condition: Another social group benefits from the institutional practice.*

*The coercion condition: There is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm. 1. (Cudd 2006, 25)*

As we can see, groups play a central role in Cudd's theory of oppression, as the "social group condition" is a necessary condition for oppression on her account. According to Cudd, groups are "terminological devices" for aggregates of individuals, and groups are metaphysically-speaking nothing over and above individuals. (Cudd 2006, 46) Cudd also holds that it is *essential* that certain social explanations appeal to social groups. (Cudd 2006, 33 and 46) I will call this view *explanatory individualism*.

To understand this view, it will be helpful to introduce *methodological individualism*, which is a position about the nature of the social sciences. Methodological individualism consists of two parts: an explanatory thesis and an ontological thesis. According to the explanatory thesis, in order to explain social phenomena we only need appeal to individuals. According to the ontological thesis, the social world is entirely composed of individuals and there are no groups or other social entities beyond individuals. <3> To apply this framework to Cudd we can see that she endorses the ontological aspect of methodological individualism but rejects the explanatory aspect. That is to say, Cudd holds that the social world consists of nothing over and above individuals, while also holding that social explanations must sometimes appeal to groups. To apply this to a purported case of oppression, we

can use Marilyn Frye's famous example of gendered door-opening, the practice of men opening doors for women but not vice-versa. (Frye 1983) On Cudd's account, the practice of gendered door-opening is created and maintained through causal interactions between individuals, but if we want to understand and explain the practice of gendered door-opening and any injustice associated with it if it does turn out to be oppressive, then we must appeal to groups. This example will be examined in more detail below, but this is the rough sketch of Cudd's treatment of this case and it illustrates the benefits of this position for the individualist. In endorsing this view an oppression theorist can hold on to their individualism and hence their liberalism while still endorsing a theory of oppression. However, if we dig into this view in some more detail, we will see that the role played by groups in this theory generates some problems.

To understand these problems, we need to examine the motivation for and articulation of Cudd's account. Cudd argues that there is a specific need for a theory of oppression because existing attempts to make sense of certain injustices do not acknowledge groups, and she holds that we can make sense of this group element of oppression while still only ontologically committing to individuals. Cudd argues for this position through an analogy with certain economic explanations, pointing out that we can be individualists about economics while permitting aggregate social facts, such as facts about inflation or gross national product, to appear in economic explanations. (Cudd 2006, 33-34) Accordingly, argues Cudd, the role of groups in oppression is just like this; we must posit groups to explain certain social phenomena, but this posit is only for explanatory purposes. To illustrate this view, Cudd examines Frye's analysis of gendered door-opening. Cudd argues that we simply cannot understand or explain this ritual, regardless of whether or not we understand it as oppressive, if we do not refer to social groups in our explanation. If, on the one hand, the practice is based on negative stereotypes of women, then we cannot explain it without some reference to

default assumptions about social groups. If, on the other hand, the practice is based on mere custom or habit and is not oppressive, we must still refer to social groups in order to explain the custom or habit. Either way, the explanation must refer to social groups. (Cudd 2006, 47) If this is the case, Cudd argues, we need not ontologically commit to social groups. Instead we can acknowledge that social groups are mere explanatory posits, just as in the economics case, and if this is acceptable in the case of economics then, Cudd argues, it is also acceptable in the case of oppression.

At this point we face a problem. It seems that groups are indispensable to the explanation of gendered door-opening because that explanation must refer to *beliefs about groups*, which is different from referring directly to groups. If we go back to the text, the matter is not entirely clear. Cudd states, *“It does not make sense unless we include in the explanans reference to default assumptions about social groups, namely the stereotype of women as weak and small... If one objects that it is custom or habit that explains why the man always opens doors for women, then one must explain the origin of the custom or habit, and this explanation will rely on references to social groups.”* (Cudd 2006, 47) On the one hand, the explanation of the custom or habit could include a number of group features that are not just *beliefs* about groups, such as the fact that women are on average lighter and shorter than men, or facts about the history of notions of chivalry, but one could also offer an interpretation according to which it is merely the beliefs about groups that must enter into the explanation.

Positing beliefs about groups for explanatory purposes does not entail positing groups for explanatory purposes. Consider, for example, an explanation of a certain social practice that appeals to the fact that the people involved in the practice believe that they are vampires. Such an explanation would appeal to beliefs about vampires without necessarily positing vampires. This is important because if on Cudd’s view *beliefs about groups* are the indispensable explanatory posit, rather

than groups themselves, then this challenges the idea that the theory of oppression brings something different, a role for groups, to the table, as it would turn out that groups do not play a central role in the theory. A theory of social justice that merely posits beliefs in general, rather than groups, does not posit anything particularly new, and so merely positing beliefs would not be enough to make the oppression theory distinct from alternative liberal approaches to social justice. This would not show that the oppression theory is false, but it would diminish the unique contribution purportedly made by the oppression theory.

However, let us say for the sake of argument that to explain these instances of injustice we *must* appeal to groups rather than merely to beliefs about groups. If that is the case then we face another problem. As discussed above, Cudd explained the role of groups in her theory using an analogy with economics, pointing out that we can posit certain economic entities for explanatory reasons without ontologically committing to those entities. However, there are features of the case of oppression that are disanalogous to the case of economics, and the disanalogies generate some problems for Cudd's view. In the economics case the posits are aggregate facts about, for example, inflation or gross domestic product. Given the stipulation that these are aggregates of facts about individuals, in principle we could put all of the individual transactions into our economic calculations and explanations and achieve the same results that were achieved by appealing to the aggregate facts. Doing so would be extremely complicated so this would not be a particularly practical approach, but if these are mere aggregates then it should in principle be possible. However, Cudd's approach to the case of oppression is importantly different. According to Cudd, the oppression theorist posits groups not just to bypass numerical complexity; instead, it is *absolutely essential* that our explanations posit groups if we are to understand and explain certain social phenomena. Cudd's analysis of gendered door-opening illustrates this point, because as discussed above Cudd argues that we cannot



explain the practice without some reference to social groups. (Cudd 2006, 47) On this view, even the proverbial Laplacean Martian would need to appeal to groups to explain the door-opening ritual.

One could argue that in the case of door-opening we clearly *can* explain the door-opening ritual through appeal only to individuals, but that it would be unwieldy to do so, and so the group posit is not indispensable and Cudd's case is analogous to the economics case after all. However, this is not what Cudd claims; instead, Cudd claims that the group posit is indispensable to the explanation. Furthermore, holding that there is an individualist explanation in this case threatens the position that the appeal to groups, and hence the oppression theory itself, is essential for explaining certain cases of injustice. On the view that an oppression theory that posits groups is useful for avoiding complexity, the theory turns out to be *pragmatically valuable* rather than *indispensable* for the explanation of certain social phenomena.

For the sake of argument let us stipulate, then, that in the economic case we could (at least in principle) give an individualist explanation, whereas in the oppression case we could not even in principle give an individualist explanation. An explicit goal of Cudd's theory is that the theory should enable us to identify, predict and intervene in instances of injustice. <4> Let us also assume that Cudd succeeds in this; her view turns out to be the best theory for identifying, predicting and intervening in certain instances of injustice. If this is the case, then groups are an indispensable posit in our best theory for the explanation of, prediction of and intervention in certain instances of injustice. There is a good case for moving from this indispensability to a denial of the ontological aspect of methodological individualism via a simple inference to the best explanation. If groups are an indispensable posit in our best theory, then by inference to the best explanation we have a good reason to be ontologically committed to groups. This is a strange outcome: if we endorse Cudd's

theory and believe in its success, then we have good reason to reject the ontological individualism at its heart. This outcome arises because there is a tension between claiming that groups are totally indispensable for explaining certain social phenomena and that only a theory of oppression that posits groups can make sense of those phenomena, without also ontologically committing to the posits of the theory. However, there are significant resources that Cudd or another explanatory individualist could use to respond to this problem and to dissolve this tension.

First, if an explanatory individualist wants to hold on to the claim that the group posit in the oppression theory is indispensable, and that the oppression theory is essential for prediction and explanation, then she could block the inference to the best explanation by providing other significant theoretical considerations in favor of individualism. For example, arguing that a liberal political theory committed to ontological individualism is more desirable for general reasons not specifically pertinent to oppression could allow the explanatory individualist to avoid this problem. This poses no problem for a liberal political theorist such as Cudd, but exploring this issue from a metaphysical standpoint shows us that the defense of liberalism has to be strong enough to enable the proponent of this view to push back against the natural move of endorsing the existence of groups, in light of their explanatory indispensability. <5>

Second, the explanatory individualist could embrace scepticism about inference to the best explanation, or else a form of anti-realism about political theories (or, indeed, about theories in general). Both options would have to be independently motivated because to adopt any general metaphysical position just to avoid these problems would be ad-hoc, but there are independent motivations for these options. For example, certain philosophers of science have argued that inference to the best explanation is problematic for a number of reasons, including concerns about

the criteria for best, whether those criteria really are evidential, and which options go into the pool of alternatives. <6>

However, the explanatory individualist could avoid these problems altogether if she simply weakens her claim about the indispensability of theories of oppression that posit groups. On such a view, theories that posit groups would be *sometimes useful* for identifying, predicting and explaining injustice, but they would not be *indispensable* for those purposes. The inference to the best explanation would then be blocked, and the explanatory individualist could hold on to her ontological individualism. On this view, however, the theory of oppression would be less important. A central claim of oppression theorists, that a theory positing groups is *essential* if we are to understand and explain certain social phenomena, would have to be abandoned. There could still be a substantial role for the oppression theory in social thought, but as an occasionally useful heuristic tool rather than an essential tool for targeting and responding to injustice.

### ***Position 2: Nonreductive Individualism***

Some individualist oppression theorists may wish to attribute a more robust role to groups than is permitted by the explanatory individualist, and acknowledging group causes is one way to do this. By permitting group causes the oppression theorist can vindicate the idea that in instances of oppression groups play an active role in changing the shape of society and can have a real, and often harmful, impact on individuals' lives. One fruitful option for an individualist who wishes to take group causes seriously is to adopt a position about the relationship between groups and individuals that is analogous to the nonreductive physicalist's view about the relationship between physical and mental states.

Nonreductive physicalism is a position that permits the physicalist, who thinks that every event has a sufficient physical cause, to accommodate the apparently attractive view that mental states (or properties or events) can cause things to happen, including physical events. <7> For example, it is commonly thought that mental events, such as my decision to walk to the post office, can cause other events, such as my actually walking to the post office. The nonreductive physicalist holds that physicalism is true, but that mental properties are not reducible to physical properties. They acknowledge mental causes, but hold that every event has a sufficient physical cause. We can describe a theory of oppression using similar principles. A *nonreductive individualist* would hold a view similar to nonreductive physicalism, with *group* events, properties and causes in place of mental events, properties and causes, and *individual* events, properties and causes in place of physical events, properties and causes. According to the nonreductive individualist every group or individual event has a sufficient individual cause, but groups can also cause events, including individual and group events. To return to a familiar example, on this view the practice of gendered door-opening has a group cause (or causes), which might include features such as conventions, practices and stereotypes surrounding gender, but also has an individual cause (or causes), perhaps including the endorsement of such conventions by the individuals who engage in the practice. Any particular instance of gendered door-opening would also similarly have a group cause, again perhaps including the conventions and practices surrounding gender, and an individual cause, perhaps including that person's endorsement of those conventions and practices, and their decision to open the door.

I am unaware of any oppression theorist who explicitly endorses nonreductive individualism, but it is a natural option for the individualist who wishes to recognize a more robust role for groups than the explanatory individualist, but who does not want to endorse full-blown nonindividualism.

Furthermore, there are clear benefits to this position for the individualist oppression theorist, as they

can hold on to individualism while also being able to acknowledge group causation. In doing so they can flesh out the claim that a theory of oppression brings some new and much-needed resources to the table, in this case a causal role for groups.

However nonreductive physicalism is haunted by a problem known as the *causal exclusion problem*.

Those who press this problem argue that nonreductive physicalists are committed to a set of inconsistent principles, because if every event has a sufficient physical cause then there is effectively nothing left for the mental to *do*. In order to explain the causal exclusion problem, I will first explain how it affects the nonreductive physicalist, and then how it affects the nonreductive individualist.

The causal exclusion problem does not show that nonreductive physicalism is false – as I discuss below, there is a lively literature in which nonreductive physicalists respond to the problem.

However, this problem does show just how difficult it is to formulate a defensible version of nonreductive physicalism, and as we will see, nonreductive individualist oppression theorists will face a similar challenge.

Nonreductive physicalists (at least typically) endorse these three principles:

- Distinctness: Mental properties (events) are distinct from physical properties (events).
- Completeness: Everything that happens has a sufficient physical cause.
- Efficacy: Mental events sometimes cause physical events, and sometimes do so in virtue of their mental properties. <8>

The nonreductive physicalist is committed to Distinctness because this principle captures the distinctively nonreductive element of their position; the mental is distinct from the physical and hence not reducible to the physical. They are committed to Completeness because this captures their commitment to physicalism. If Completeness were false, there would be nonphysical causes and so

physicalism would be false. Efficacy is important because to deny Efficacy is to deny that the mental can play any genuine causal role.

The causal exclusion problem arises from Distinctness, Completeness and Efficacy, combined with two other principles: Nonoverdetermination and Exclusion. These are

- Nonoverdetermination: The effects of mental causes are not systematically overdetermined.
- Exclusion: No effect has more than one sufficient cause unless it is overdetermined.

(Bennett 2008)

The systematic overdetermination mentioned in Nonoverdetermination is the kind of overdetermination in which two distinct causes are sufficient to cause an effect, as in examples such as a firing squad case in which two distinct bullets shot by two different people are both sufficient to kill the victim. This principle is widely supported in the philosophy of mind literature, and those who support it hold that it would be a wild coincidence if every mental cause happened to be accompanied by a completely distinct sufficient physical cause. Kim, for example, has argued that the claim that there are two independent sufficient causes for any event caused by the mental is “absurd”. (Kim 1993, 281) Exclusion is taken to simply follow from the definition of overdetermination.

In a moment we will examine some attempts to solve the causal exclusion problem. But before doing so, we should formulate the version of the problem for the nonreductive individualist. In so far as their view is analogous to nonreductive physicalism, the nonreductive individualist is committed to:

- Distinctness: Group events are distinct from individual events.
- Completeness: Every group or individual event has a sufficient individual cause.

- Efficacy: Group events sometimes cause individual events, and sometimes do so in virtue of their group properties.

The theorist is committed to Distinctness because this captures the idea that groups are not reducible to individuals. They are committed to Completeness because this is the individualist element of their view, and they are committed to Efficacy because without this groups could not have a causal impact. The causal exclusion problem then arises from the combination of these three principles with:

- Nonoverdetermination: The effects of group causes are not systematically overdetermined.
- Exclusion: No effect has more than one sufficient cause unless it is overdetermined.

A nonreductive individualist may, of course, wish to deny one of these principles. But in doing so, they risk losing the benefits of this option for the individualist, in that they lose the pleasing combination of individualism and permitting genuinely distinct group causes. For instance, if the individualist denies Efficacy, then groups are epiphenomenal. If they deny Distinctness, then they are not genuinely recognizing groups. If they deny Completeness, then they abandon their individualism. Finally, they have the same reasons as the physicalist to endorse Nonoverdetermination, as it would be strange and coincidental for all events with group causes to just happen to have two distinct sufficient causes, one group and one individual.

The literature on the causal exclusion problem for the nonreductive physicalist about the mind gives us some idea of the wide range of options available for this nonreductive individualist to address this problem. Bennett, for example, has offered a compatibilist solution according to which the mental and physical are distinct but so closely related that Distinctness is satisfied without satisfying Exclusion. (Bennett 2008) A variety of authors have attempted to show that in the case of the mental and the physical the relationship between the causes is so close that even though they are

distinct, the resulting overdetermination is of an unproblematic kind. <9> These are promising options that an oppression theorist who wants to hold on to group causes could explore. However, the literature offering solutions to the overdetermination problem for the nonreductive physicalist is surpassed in size only by the literature critiquing those solutions. For example, Keaton & Polger have attempted to undermine Bennett's compatibilist strategy, Bernstein has shown that attempts to distinguish between different forms of overdetermination do not solve any problems for the nonreductive physicalist, and Ney has shown that one popular strategy, an appeal to mereological relations such as constitution, cannot solve the exclusion problem for the nonreductive physicalist. (Ney 2007; Keaton & Polger 2014; Bernstein forthcoming.)

Even if the nonreductive individualist can find a satisfactory solution to their version of the causal exclusion problem, however, they face another perhaps more serious problem. To understand this problem, consider the nonreductive individualist's analysis of the door-opening ritual. For the nonreductive physicalist a mental event, such as the decision to raise an arm, may have a sufficient physical cause and a sufficient mental cause. For the nonreductive individualist the event of the door-opening may have two sufficient causes, a group cause including various social conventions and norms around gender, and an individual cause including the individual's beliefs about those conventions and their decision to open the door. The problem arises because the group causes in the door-opening case appear to be insufficient for the event of the door-opening, and this is the case for group causes in general. Conventions and stereotypes may raise the probability that an individual will engage in the door-opening ritual or some other oppressive act, but they do not *guarantee* any individual action. This is reflected in the extent to which the groups causes explain the door-opening - to fully explain the door opening, it seems that we must mention not only the



existence of stereotypes and social conventions, but also the fact that the individual endorsed those conventions, and decided to act upon them.

This problem puts the nonreductive individualist in a difficult position. They can reply by arguing that that group causes are sufficient causes of individual events, but this is implausible because factors such as conventions and stereotypes do not *always* cause individuals to participate in the door-opening ritual. Alternatively the nonreductive individualist could deny that the group factors are sufficient causes of individual actions, but then they lose the original motivation for endorsing this view in the first place, which was to offer a more robust metaphysical role for groups than the explanatory individualist could permit. If they deny that there are sufficient group causes of such events, then they are effectively endorsing explanatory individualism. One way for the nonreductive individualist to push back against this problem would be to think carefully about the individuation of group causes. Perhaps the general characterization of the group causes in this case as "conventions and stereotypes" is too coarse-grained to capture a sufficient cause, whereas a more detailed, fine-grained account of these group factors would reveal a sufficient cause for this event. However, the nonreductive individualist would have to account for the fact that such group factors cause door-openings in some individuals but not in others.

Overall, nonreductive individualism seemed at first to be a promising option for an individualist oppression theorist who wants to attribute a more robust metaphysical role to groups than the explanatory individualist would permit, but nonreductive individualism faces serious metaphysical problems. These problems are not insurmountable, but formulating and defending a viable version of nonreductive individualism will take serious metaphysical work.

### ***Position 3: Nonindividualism***

Nonindividualist oppression theorists reject both the explanatory and ontological elements of methodological individualism. They hold that groups are essential to explanations of certain social phenomena, that groups are real rather than merely explanatory posits, and that groups are, in some sense, ontologically over-and-above the individuals that compose them. Young is one example of such a theorist. Young states that it is “*important not to deny the reality of groups*” and she holds that groups are ontologically more fundamental than their composing individuals, and that groups cause effects. (Young 1990, 44-45) To apply this view to the familiar door-opening example, Young would hold that the practice of gendered door-opening is caused by groups and that there is no sufficient individual cause for that practice. Individual instances of gendered door-opening also have group causes, in so far as an individual’s decision to engage in gendered door-opening will have a group-level cause (such as, for example, prevalent norms and stereotypes surrounding gender).

The basis for Young’s nonindividualism is her view that an ontologically individualist social theory simply cannot make sense of the way group memberships shape our identities, or of the existence of certain forms of systemic injustice. On the former Young argues that many elements of a person’s self are constituted at least partly by their group memberships. As she puts it, “*a subject’s particular sense of history, sense of identity, affinity and separateness, even the person’s mode of reasoning, evaluating and expressing feeling are constituted at least partly by her or his group affinities.*” (Young 1990, 46.) Furthermore, Young argues that group membership has an element of *thrownness*, of finding yourself as a member of the group rather than choosing to affiliate with that group, which individualist conceptions of groups cannot accommodate. This is reflected in the fact that changes in group identity, such as when we change from being young to being old or change social class, are typically experienced as having (often unwanted) dramatic and transformative effects on our personal identity. <10> In

support of the claim that individualists cannot make sense of certain forms of systemic injustice, Young notes that discrimination is an individualist concept, and that some theorists prefer to talk of discrimination rather than of oppression. But, Young argues, at the time of her writing direct discrimination against at least certain groups in the US was comparatively rare, and yet the systemic injustice faced by those groups prevailed. Accordingly, Young argues, we must adopt a nonindividualist conception of this injustice to explain its continuation. (Young 1998, 93)

For our purposes the most salient feature of Young's position is her view on the metaphysical status of groups. Young is ontologically committed to groups, holds that group causes are not reducible to individual causes and, unlike the nonreductive individualist, appears to hold that not every event has a sufficient individual cause. This last element follows from the view that groups cause events that *cannot be* caused by individuals, combined with the commitment to the nonreducibility of group causes. As in the last section it was helpful to illustrate the position through comparison with nonreductive physicalism, in this case there is also a helpful comparison available. With respect to the ontological status and causal capacity of groups, the best way to metaphysically interpret Young's view is as a form of *strong emergentism* about groups.

Strong emergentism is, roughly speaking, the position that certain entities have properties that are metaphysically autonomous from the properties of that entity's parts or components, and different accounts of strong emergence treat this autonomy differently. <11> For example, Chalmers conceives of emergent autonomy in terms of modality, Barnes in terms of dependence and fundamentality, and Wilson in terms of degrees of freedom. (Chalmers 1996; Barnes 2012; Wilson 2010) Young herself did not articulate her view as a form of emergentism, and so it is not clear which of these options she would have preferred. Accordingly, I will address Young as a strong

emergentist without commenting on which particular form of strong emergentism she would have endorsed. This position offers clear attractions for someone with Young's commitments. In endorsing strong emergentism about groups, an oppression theorist endorses an unambiguously nonindividualist view, according to which groups are as metaphysically significant as individuals, or even more so. On such a view, there is no mystery about why the explanation of certain forms of injustice must appeal to groups, because groups play a causal role equal to that played by individuals, and groups also shape and give rise to features of individuals in various important ways.

However, the proponent of this kind of oppression theory faces challenges similar to those challenges faced by strong emergentists in other areas of philosophy. These challenges are not insurmountable, but they must be addressed in order to defend a plausible ontology for this nonindividualist theory. The first challenge is that strong emergentism is a somewhat ontologically unparsimonious position. Typically philosophers are drawn to strong emergentism when faced with a seemingly brute explanatory failure, or a mysterious phenomenon that cannot be accounted for in any other way. For example, the apparent failure of attempts to explain consciousness has drawn some philosophers to emergentism about consciousness, while others have argued that emergence is needed to make sense of human free will, and physical phenomena such as entangled states. In these cases, the phenomenon in question is in some sense mysterious and/or attempts to explain it have failed or have forced philosophers and scientists to adopt entirely new and autonomous explanatory frameworks. (See e.g. Chalmers 1996; Morrison 2012) This mysteriousness and resistance to explanation is a key feature of purportedly emergent phenomena, and we do not consider endorsing strong emergentism unless faced with a very good reason to do so.

This feature of strong emergentism poses a particular problem for the nonindividualist oppression theorist who endorses strong emergentism about groups. The nonindividualist has to show not only that it is sometimes theoretically useful to posit groups as explanatory devices, or to think of our identities and selves in terms of our group memberships, but also that there are features of these instances of injustice that *demand* an interpretation in terms of emergent groups. The case for nonindividualist emergentism has to be very strong in order to support these ontological commitments.

Of course, Young would argue that her case *is* sufficiently strong to support these ontological commitments, because her case for the ontological commitment just is her social and political case against liberal individualism. Young would argue that she has shown that the liberal individualist cannot make sense of the role that groups play in forming our individual selves and identities, and cannot acknowledge the data about the social world which suggests that there is widespread injustice mediated by groups, and that accordingly we need a social theory that attributes a robust metaphysical role to groups. But note that when we look at Young's view through this metaphysical lens, the argumentative load borne by this case for nonindividualism becomes even more significant. In order to show that this fairly radical metaphysical position is viable, Young has to show that certain systemic instances of injustice are *as challenging to explain* as other candidates for strong emergentism such as consciousness or entanglement. Working out whether or not Young is successful in this requires a full assessment of her critique of liberalism, and I will not attempt to offer a verdict here. But focusing on Young's metaphysical commitments makes it clear just how strong her case against liberalism has to be in order to support this view of groups.

A second potential problem for Young and for any nonindividualist who articulates their position as a form of emergentism is that, aside from these questions about motivation, strong emergentism is problematic. In addition to being ontologically unparsimonious, many philosophers have argued that strong emergentism is simply not viable. For instance, elsewhere I have argued that accounts of strong emergentism face the ‘collapse problem’, while Kim has argued that downward causation is an essential component of emergentism, but that downward causation is impossible, and hence that strong emergentism is false. (Taylor 2015; Kim 2006) These objections do not show that a nonindividualist oppression theory is not viable, but they present a challenge for the theorist who adopts strong emergentism about groups as a way to articulate the role of groups in oppression.

Another element of Young’s views on groups is the claim that groups are ontologically more fundamental than individuals. One way to flesh out the idea that groups are more fundamental than individuals is to appeal to the concept of metaphysical determination, or *grounding*. Accounts of grounding vary, but the general idea is that there is a non-causal form of metaphysical determination that obtains between facts, which is either explanatory or has close ties to explanation. <12> A nonindividualist theorist such as Young could claim that the facts about individuals are grounded in the facts about groups, rather than the other way round, and this would imply both that groups are more fundamental than individuals and also that the facts about groups explain the facts about individuals but not vice-versa. <13>

### ***Reflections***

Exploring the metaphysical commitments of oppression theorists has revealed some internal tensions and problems that need to be addressed. This exploration has, for example, made clear the serious evidential burdens borne by certain aspects of oppression theorist’s views, as for Young

whose critique of liberalism has to be strong enough to support ontologically unparsimonious emergentism, or for Cudd whose case for the indispensability of oppression theories rests on the case for the explanatory necessity of groups. However, one could argue that despite the fact that oppression theorists such as Young and Cudd do make metaphysical claims, the details of their actual theories of oppression do not depend on those claims. For example, one could point out that Cudd's four conditions for oppression do not presuppose any particular metaphysical view on groups, and so regardless of what Cudd herself thinks about groups, we could combine her account of oppression with any background metaphysics. The metaphysics would still have to be coherent and plausible, but the challenge of developing and defending it would not be specifically Cudd's problem. However, it is not the case that particular oppression theories do not involve metaphysical commitments. For instance, an eliminativist about groups would not countenance Cudd's explanatory appeal to groups, as the eliminativist would eschew even explanations involving groups in favor of fully individualist explanations. Furthermore, Young's case for her theory of oppression relies on her critique of liberal individualism, which is based on the idea that only a theory *with certain metaphysical commitments* can make sense of the role that groups play in shaping our identities, and as agents and targets of injustice. Oppression theorists do have metaphysical commitments, and those commitments are central to the success or otherwise of their theories. If we are to genuinely understand and evaluate feminist theories of oppression, we must understand and evaluate the metaphysical commitments of those theories.

This discussion had three main goals. One was to simply clarify the metaphysical elements of some different theories of oppression, in the hope of more clearly articulating and understanding those theories. The second was to identify certain problem areas generated by the metaphysical commitments of oppression theories. And the third was to offer some suggestions about resources

from contemporary metaphysics that will assist oppression theorists in addressing these problems. It will take serious work to articulate and defend a plausible ontology of oppression for any theory, but contemporary metaphysics provides oppression theorists with an array of resources for addressing this challenge.

## NOTES

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1. My goal in this paper is not to argue that there is oppression, but instead to articulate some metaphysical problems for different theories of oppression. I will assume that oppression exists for the purposes of this discussion.
2. Cudd describes these developments in Chapter 1 of Cudd 2006
3. Levine, Sober & Wright offer a taxonomy of different versions of methodological individualism in Levine, Sober & Wright 1987
4. Cudd 2006, 21 *If the theory cannot provide a means by which oppression can be reduced, then either the theory must deny that it is unjust ... or fail to give an adequate causal accounts of its maintenance. Such a theory would be pointless to pursue.*
5. Cudd has defended liberal feminism in pieces such as Cudd 2004
6. For example, see Van Fraassen 1989



7. There are many alternative formulations of physicalism, but I present this one as a fairly uncontroversial basis for nonreductive physicalism.
8. These principles are from Bennett 2008.
9. Ney surveys these in Ney 2007
10. Young 1990, 46 ... *such changes in group affinity are experienced as transformations in one's identity.*
11. There are many different versions of emergentism, but this is one standard formulation of strong emergentism. See Wilson forthcoming for discussion of different forms of emergentism.
12. See Correia & Schneider 2012 for a survey of recent work on grounding.
13. There is logical space left open for a very strong version of nonindividualism according to which the social world is made up *entirely* of groups, and individuals are merely explanatory posits. I am not sure that there are any oppression theorists who hold this view, as even nonindividualists are typically ontologically committed to individuals as well as groups. Denying the existence of individuals would be a tall order, however, so I will not discuss this option here.

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