

# **The Deferential Wife Revisited**

*Agency and Moral Responsibility*

Anita Superson

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This paper rejects two main arguments for absolving the deferential wife and victims of deprived circumstances from responsibility or blame for their servility: for Susan Wolf, circumstances can determine their reasons and acts, and for Sarah Buss, circumstances can give them excusing reasons for their acts. The paper argues that circumstances can give them justifying reasons to act in ways defending their intrinsic worth when their acts can be legitimately interpreted as a protest against an attempt to degrade their intrinsic value.

In a well-known paper, Thomas Hill describes the deferential wife (DW) as a woman who is utterly devoted to her husband, buys clothes he prefers, has sex when he is in the mood, and moves where he wants (Hill 1995, 78). She tends not to form her own interests, values, and ideals, but when she does she counts them as less important than her husband's. Curiously, she believes that women are mentally and physically equal, if not superior, to men, but that women's proper role is to serve their families. She does not believe that anyone is trampling on her rights, because she is glad and proud to serve her husband.

I am interested in two issues: whether the DW (and women like her) are morally responsible for their servility or lack of self-respect, and what the connection is between responsibility and agency.

Several explanations of the DW's servility have been defended, each of which indicates a failure of moral agency on the part of the DW. Kant believes that the servile person violates a duty of self-respect (1830/1963, 533), grounded in our capacity for rationality, requiring us "to act only in ways that are consistent with our status as moral beings and [not] abase, degrade, defile, or disavow our dignity" (Dillon 1995, 15), and in doing so subordinates his reason to his inclination (Kant 1830/1963, 527-30; Massey 1983). He believes that a rational being has intrinsic value or worth that cannot be lowered by another being, a view that I will adopt in this paper. Hill believes that servility consists in a failure to understand and acknowledge one's right to some minimum degree of respect from others that cannot be waived (Hill 1995, 79, 82, 89). The DW has a mistaken belief that she has a moral duty to serve her husband, and is confused about her rights (79, 83). Marilyn Friedman believes that since the DW can make her husband's preferences her own and so not be servile on Hill's account, her servility lies in her uncritically deferring to her husband's preferences by failing to assess them in accord with her own principles (Friedman 1985, 146). Her problem is the absence of effective moral judgment, which makes her less than a whole person (147). But Friedman needs to acknowledge that the DW's principle to serve her family might itself be deformed since it is at odds with having intrinsic worth. Furthermore, Marcia Baron objects that Friedman collapses wishing to abide by another's wishes and sharing the person's wishes (Baron 1985). As the DW need not adopt her husband's preferences but only share them, her servility cannot be explained on the grounds that she adopts them uncritically. Instead it is due to a lack of a critical examination of her reasons for deferring to her husband's preferences (398).

These explanations show that the DW lacks what Robin Dillon calls "agentic recognition self-respect," which involves developing, exercising, and protecting one's capacity for agency by committing oneself to values worthy of one's commitment and striving to be autonomous in reflectively assessing one's desires, preferences, and standards (Dillon 1992, 130-31, 133). Because the DW commits herself to servile values (Hill), or does not appropriately assess her preferences (Friedman), or does not examine her reasons for deferring to her husband's principles (Baron), she seems to be a failure at (ideal) moral (and rational) agency.

I agree that the DW's agency is compromised because, as I will explain, her own ideal of a worthwhile life and standards by which to judge it, as well as some of her desires, are deformed by social circumstances and stand in the way of her being fully autonomous. To be a fully autonomous ideal moral agent, she needs to scrutinize her principles, not just her preferences, which requires being visionary. More generally, I believe that women can be strongly influenced by social forces, yet still exercise moral agency; they can be full moral agents if we change social conditions in ways that allow them to recognize their intrinsic worth and exercise their autonomy even in choosing principles for scrutinizing their desires.

But is the DW's compromised agency a good and sufficient reason to absolve her from responsibility for her servility? My main motivation here is to address the worry that freeing from responsibility the DW or any woman who endorses and acts on patriarchal values mistakenly treats her as if she has no moral agency. For unless we ascribe at least some responsibility to women for their servility, they might be considered merely the "dupes of patriarchy," who, according to Uma Narayan, buy into patriarchy wholesale without considering what they are doing in terms of reasons, and whose agency is thus "completely pulverized by patriarchy" (Narayan 2002, 222). Because women's agency historically has not been respected or even acknowledged (e.g., they are assumed to have no minds of their own or to be largely under the control of their emotions), it is particularly salient that we not make moral claims about women that treat them as if they have no agency. Doing so is a small step to believing that they in fact are not full moral agents and that such treatment is justified.

My aim is to absolve the DW from responsibility for her servility in a way that does not treat her as if she has no agency. Specifically, I will argue that the DW is not responsible for her servility because there is a sense in which her acts are legitimately interpreted as an appropriate response to the messages of inferiority she receives from the patriarchal society in which she lives, and in which there are reasons related to but not grounded in her circumstances for her to act in ways that she deems to be self-respecting. I will examine and reject two other intriguing accounts of responsibility that speak to whether one's circumstances can absolve one from responsibility for a wrongdoing. One is Susan Wolf's view, that if one's reasons are determined by one's circumstances, then one's acts stemming from these reasons are determined, so one is not responsible for them (Wolf 1986). The second is Sarah Buss's view, that anyone in bad circumstances has reason not to act on the reasons there are to be moral. Whether these reasons or moral reasons are overriding depends on features such as the nature of the wrongdoing (Buss 1997). Buss holds responsible those agents who perform objectively determined morally wrong acts, though she argues in favor of not blaming them. I defend the view that there is a sense in which sometimes there is reason to act immorally, not just that the agent has reason to act this way; that is, acting in immoral ways is itself justified in certain circumstances. To see this counterintuitive view, we need to see the act under a different description, one sensitive to the agent's circumstances, as representing the agent's legitimate response to an attempt to degrade her intrinsic value. Having these reasons frees the agent from responsibility for acting on them.

Let us first clarify the notions of responsibility and blameworthiness. Wolf understands responsibility to include the requirement that a person be a moral agent to whom moral claims apply and whose actions are under his or her control (Wolf 1986, 225). Buss believes that "if someone is capable (when he acts) of conforming his behavior to a rational assessment of his options, then he is just the sort of agent we can require to produce reasons for his action. I.e., he is accountable for this action. I.e., he is morally, as well as causally, responsible for what he does" (Buss 1997, 344). In addition, agents who are responsible can exercise self-control, and when they are indifferent to considerations of right and wrong their indifference is a perfectly reasonable response to perverse circumstances (360). There are two senses of responsibility in Wolf's and Buss's views. One tells us what kind of being is capable of having a responsibility ascription applied to it: agents are responsible when they can freely choose their actions (their actions are in their control in the sense of being a product of their will and not under coercion or determined by some external force) and can rationally assess their options and give reasons for their actions. A second notion of responsibility refers to liability: an agent who meets the first description and who does wrong is morally responsible in the sense of being morally liable for the wrongdoing. So let us understand moral responsibility in toto to be defined roughly as follows: A person is morally responsible if she or he freely chooses to do what is in fact morally wrong and is accountable for her or his wrongdoing.

Briefly, Wolf's analysis focuses on the requirement of freedom: she absolves from responsibility certain agents in special circumstances on the grounds that their actions are not free. Buss's analysis focuses on the relation between circumstances and reasons and so on the justifiability of the choice: she holds responsible agents who freely act wrongly, but frees from blame certain agents in special circumstances

on the grounds that they can give good reasons for their wrongdoing. Blameworthiness, for Buss, is a matter of responsible agents' not having good reasons for their wrongdoing. Excusing reasons free from blame this kind of agent.<sup>1</sup> I focus on the justifiability of the action itself: I absolve from responsibility certain agents in special circumstances on the grounds that there are good reasons for their actions when these actions are re-described in terms of the agents' legitimate response to an attempt to degrade their worth. Because the reasons I offer for the agent's actions are justifying, not excusing, they free the agent from both responsibility and blame. I hope to show that the DW is the kind of being about whom responsibility ascriptions can be made, but at the same time I argue for absolving her from responsibility for her servility on the grounds just stated.

The second point to clarify is Wolf's important distinction between a person's having a reason and there being a reason. For Wolf, there exist good and sufficient reasons to act morally, independent of the agent's recognition of them ("there are reasons around"). Buss might call them "objective reasons," justified according to an external standard of reasonableness (Buss 1997, 350). For Wolf, whether a person has these reasons depends on whether she has a certain kind of sensibility and perception that a person who was raised properly, with a moral sense of sorts, has, and that allows the person to seek to achieve virtue. We cannot reasonably expect that agents who do not seek virtue due to their upbringing will see anything wrong with the bad (immoral) actions they perform. Wolf clarifies that a person's socialization is a condition that is not internal to him: it is not that his reasoning functions improperly, but that his data are unfortuitously selective. His "data," or the background facts about his socialization and the reasons stemming from them, prevent him from having the kind of sensibility and perception that, together with the capacity to reason, would allow him to seek to achieve "the True and the Good." So even though there are good and sufficient reasons to seek virtue, agents who have not been taught to act morally may not have discovered them on their own; they do not *have* reason to act justly (Wolf 1986, 232-35).

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf also would not blame agents whose acts are determined, for the reason that they are not responsible. Wolf seems to use these notions interchangeably.

# The DW

As the background circumstances of the DW play an important role in my argument for absolving her from responsibility for her servility, I need to elaborate on Hill's description of the case.<sup>1</sup> Feminists have noted many practices and behaviors in a patriarchal society that send women a message of inferior worth, and even mask this message, legitimately confusing women about their value as persons. These range from earning only 77 percent of what men earn for comparable work in the paid workforce (Cudd 2006, 147); being taught that their value centers around being beautiful even if it means they have to starve themselves to be successful or even accepted (Wolf 1991); being routinely subject to catcalls on the street that are instantly objectifying (Bartky 1979/1990, 27); being sexually harassed and raped in alarming numbers;<sup>2</sup> and even not having rape recognized as a harm, as when a man held his girlfriend hostage and raped her four times over several hours in a posh salon in an upscale shopping center near Chicago, and the media reported that "no one was hurt."<sup>3</sup>

The prevalence of sexist acts, practices, and institutions causes many women at least at times to believe the message of inferiority they send, or at least to be confused about their worth as persons. But even one act of rape can be sufficiently grievous to cause a victim to lose an entire lifetime of self-esteem, and I would add, sense of her own intrinsic worth (Brison 2002, 63). Masking the message of inferiority as the right way for people or states of affairs to be, as when rape is seen as just a more aggressive version of "good sex," or when a husband's slapping his wife is seen as normal behavior, is another source of women's confusion about their value. What is more, the message of inferiority in a particular sexist act reverberates to all members of the group women, confusing even indirect victims about their value as persons. Jean Hampton remarks that discrimination sends the message, "Your *kind* isn't the equal in worth of my kind," and rape sends the message that "As a woman you are the *kind* of human being who is subject to the mastery of people of my kind" (Hampton 1999, 135, my emphasis). Finally, having particularly intense indoctrination of patriarchal values from families that endorse the social messages of inferiority and/or have conservative religious beliefs makes it particularly difficult for some women to deflect these messages because there is no safe haven to which they can turn for self-validation.

Undoubtedly, women are also sent messages that they have equal worth to men, and these become more numerous as society becomes more progressive. Women have been able to vote for decades (a century, for white women); can pursue careers in even the top professions; can sue on grounds of sex discrimination; enjoy legal protections, though imperfect, against rape and battery; and get access to much of the same health care as men. But even messages of equal worth are insufficient for many women to overcome the messages of inferiority. Psychologists testify to the fragility of our self-esteem, which comes from a sense of our own accomplishments, noting that even in the face of positive enforcement and acknowledgment one is more likely to believe negative messages. I suspect that our sense of self-worth

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<sup>1</sup> I leave aside Hill's controversial cases of patriarchal women who resist moral conclusions or who become morally enlightened but are lazy, timid, or self-serving (Hill 1995, 83-84).

<sup>2</sup> Every six minutes in the United States a woman is raped (ABC Nightly News 2004; data from Amnesty International). Eighty-eight percent of women have experienced some form of sexual harassment (Tong 1984, 66). Seventy-six percent of girls in grades 3-11 said they have been the target of sexual comments, jokes, or gestures or looks from teachers and other students, and 65 percent said they were touched, fondled, or pinched in a sexual manner (Chicago Tribune 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Many men report that they would rape a woman if they could get away with it. One national study reports that 25 percent of college men admitted to having engaged in coercive sexual behavior (Koss et al. 1987). Another study found that 15 percent of college men admitted to penetrating date rape, and 11 percent acknowledged using physical force to obtain intercourse (Rapaport and Burkhart 1984). I thank Carol Jordan for these references.

is at least as fragile, partly because of its significance to our place in the moral community and our sense of ourselves as subjects deserving certain treatment. Any attempt to degrade our worth is likely to make us doubt our status in the moral community.

Importantly for our purposes, women like the DW become confused about what self-respect requires. Commonsense morality reflects the ongoing ideology of her society whose norms require that a woman stand by her man and that a good mother be nurturing to the point of sacrificing her interests and needs to her family, while men and fathers have no such expectations and are even praised when they do their share of the housework and child-rearing. Commonsense morality also genderizes seemingly universal moral duties, such as the moral injunction to be nice to others: for men, this means doing the right thing, or at least avoiding evil, but for women, it means, in addition, not responding to those who assault your dignity, not challenging authority, accepting your role with cheerfulness—in short, being deferential. To be sure, commonsense morality does not require that women be slavish in the sense of valuing themselves improperly, but it gives them the wrong view about what self-respect requires: it confuses women like the DW that the self-respecting thing to do is to act in servile ways.<sup>4</sup>

The frequency and seriousness of such sexist practices and behaviors might provide grounds for absolving from responsibility for servility women like the DW. The DW may have had particularly intense indoctrination into patriarchal values, perhaps being the victim of a grievous act of sexism, or having been sent repeated messages of inferiority by society at large as well as by her intimates. If so, it is likely that she becomes confused both about her value as a person and about what self-respect requires. Even women who are not so strongly indoctrinated, and who are generally secure about their worth, might at times have experiences that give them pause about their own intrinsic worth. In general, the stronger the socialization, the more unreasonable it is to expect women to overcome their socialization and be self-respecting. The DW does not overcome her socialization and be self-respecting, but instead becomes servile to her husband and family, believing that this is what morality requires in the way of self-respect. Since Hill describes her as being “happy and proud” to serve her husband, she likely has related desires deformed by patriarchy. Satisfying these desires keeps her confused about her worth as a person, making her deformed desires both a cause and an effect of her confusion about her worth. Her confusion affects how she construes her choices, opportunities, and the like; she has a hard time seeing things any other way.

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<sup>4</sup> Even some of our philosophical moral theories do not properly acknowledge that their requirements conflict with self-respect. Judith Thomson criticizes act utilitarianism for requiring that we sacrifice our own inherently individual interests (e.g., life and bodily autonomy) for the sake of the general welfare (Thomson 1990, 220-22). Jean Hampton criticizes theories of care that obligate us to act altruistically to the point of being non-self-respecting (Hampton 1993). Susan Wolf criticizes all moral theories on this score, singling out utilitarianism and Kantianism, though she does not explicitly make the link to self-respect: utilitarianism requires that the Loving Saint sacrifice qualities that would aid in his flourishing, and Kantianism requires that the Rational Saint always be motivated by the thought of duty (Wolf 1982, 87, 89).

# Attempts to Absolve the DW from Responsibility<sup>1</sup>

I now turn to the compelling accounts offered by Wolf and Buss that attempt to absolve from responsibility certain wrongdoers like the DW for reasons relating to their circumstances. Although I think Wolf's account takes us in the right direction because it does not make out these agents to be irrational, I reject it in the end because it is more deterministic than it needs to be, and in virtue of this mistakenly treats the wrongdoer as if she or he has no agency. I find Buss's account empowering because it rightly rejects determinism and in virtue of doing so does not make this mistake about the wrongdoer's agency. But it shows only that the wrongdoer is justified in acting as she or he does, not that the act itself is justified. Indeed, Buss does not want to show the latter point, because in most cases she believes that the act is wrong, and that we can deem it to be wrong while freeing the agent from blame yet holding the agent responsible for the act. My view again is that there is a sense in which, in cases where the agent is responding to an attempt to degrade her intrinsic value, her (alleged) wrongdoing is itself justified. In sum, for Wolf, circumstances can determine the reasons you have; for Buss, circumstances can give you excusing reasons for your actions; and for myself, circumstances can give you justifying reasons for your actions. My view has the advantage that it treats the wrongdoer as having moral agency, yet it is sensitive to the role that circumstances can play in influencing a person's actions. Contra Buss's account, my account, in showing the way in which a wrongdoing can itself be justified, does not hold responsible for wrongdoings those agents whose bad circumstances direct them toward reasons for acting wrongly and away from moral reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Another reason to absolve the DW from responsibility might be that she is irrational. But she does not seem to be. Hill does not describe her as suffering from rage, passion, depression, grief, or physical or mental illness. (For this list, see Korsgaard 1986a, 13-14. Stark mentions self-deception and being disingenuous [Stark 1997].) Nor is she indifferent about her moral status or reason to be self-respecting, because she believes that women are equal, if not superior, to men and holds the (bad) moral principle that a woman's duty is to serve her family. She is not negligent by failing to reflect rationally on her moral status or reason to be self-respecting when she should, but merely comes up with the wrong answer. Nor is she self-deceived: she lives up to the servile principle she believes in, and would be able to face her intrinsic value were she to come fully to see it. She is not disingenuous as she sincerely believes she is doing the right thing. Nor is she weak-willed, recognizing her intrinsic worth but succumbing to emotion and not being self-respecting. She does not rationalize, recognizing her worth but telling herself a story that it is false. She reasons correctly, understands what it means to have intrinsic worth, sees that if a person has intrinsic worth she will respect herself, but is legitimately confused about her own worth because of her experiences. Having false beliefs, though, which is the source of her confusion, is insufficient for being irrational.



# Wolf's Argument

Wolf considers whether the victim of a deprived childhood (VDC), who was given no love, was beaten by his father and neglected by his mother, and was exposed in his youth only to people who gave him examples of evil and selfishness, is responsible for embezzling money later in life (Wolf 1986, 233). Because no one ever respected the VDC's property, he believes that respecting others' property is foolish. Wolf says that in acting wrongly, he is not coerced, not overcome by irresistible impulse, is in complete possession of normal adult faculties of reason and observation, has control over his behavior, and acts on the basis of choice and chooses on the basis of reason. According to Wolf, in order for an action to be morally blameworthy, there must be good and sufficient reasons to act otherwise. In order for an agent to be blameworthy, he must unconditionally have been able to do something else. Wolf claims that despite the fact that the VDC has as much control over his life as the rest of us have over our lives, "[i]t is because he couldn't have had reason that this agent should not be blamed," or that "from his point of view, one cannot reasonably expect him to see anything wrong with his action" (233).<sup>1</sup> He could not have had reasons not to embezzle, even though there were reasons around. This is because his reasons are determined by his circumstances. His problem is not with the functioning of his reason, but, again, "that his data were unfortuitously selected," by which I understand Wolf to mean that the kind of reasons he recognizes has been determined by his bad circumstances (234). His reason cannot attain its appropriate goal, "the True and the Good," that is, he cannot recognize moral reasons, in particular, reasons not to embezzle. Only a kind of sensibility and perception, together with the capacity to reason, would make him see that embezzling is wrong and that there is reason against it. Wolf seems to make a more strongly deterministic claim than her remarks about his control allow, namely, that he is determined to act the way he does, in virtue of the fact that his reasons are determined: "[H]e would have done otherwise, if he had tried. He would have tried to do otherwise, if he had chosen. And he would have chosen to do otherwise, if he had had reason" (234). Wolf concludes that the VDC is not blameworthy or responsible because he does not have reason to act otherwise, even though there are reasons not to embezzle: his reasons, and hence his actions stemming from them, are determined by his circumstances. As they are determined, and so not under his control in the sense that they are not freely chosen, he is absolved from responsibility for embezzling.

We might say the same for the DW, whose circumstances are similar in kind to this victim's. Both are raised in an environment that interferes with their recognizing moral reasons: the VDC does not recognize reasons for not embezzling, while the DW's confusion about her worth as a person confuses her about what moral reasons really are, and she sees servility as self-respecting. Like the VDC, the DW is not coerced or overcome by irresistible impulse, controls her behavior, and is rational in acting on the basis of choice and choosing on the basis of reason. The DW's data were unfortuitously selected: she has mistaken beliefs about her worth. And while the VDC lacks a kind of sensibility and perception that would make him see moral reasons, the DW lacks the vision she would need to see that she has intrinsic worth and that self-respect is opposed to servility. For Wolf, what gets the VDC off the responsibility hook is that (1) his data were unfortuitously selected (i.e., he sees only one set of reasons), and (2) because of his circumstances, he lacks the sensibility and perception needed to recognize moral reasons, and so (3) his reasons, and thus his actions stemming from them, are determined by his circumstances. Applying Wolf's reasoning about the VDC to the DW, the DW would be absolved from responsibility for

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf seems to understand blameworthiness to apply to agents who both are responsible in the sense that their actions are not determined and they have acted wrongly, and have reasons not to act wrongly.

her servility on the grounds that her servility is determined by her socialization: she cannot see (genuine) moral reasons opposing servility, and lacks what it takes—being visionary—to see these reasons. She has a will that is shaped by patriarchy and that governs her choice about which reasons to act on: she is compelled to see and act on reasons for being servile.

But Wolf's construal of the VDC's/DW's situation seems to be unnecessarily strong. Buss rejects Wolf's argument as invalid because circumstances can give a person a reason to act without compelling her to act (Buss 1997, 341). That is, a person's reasons may be determined, but they do not necessarily make her act as they dictate—determinism does not carry all the way down from reasons to actions. The break in Wolf's argument, for Buss, must occur somewhere between having a reason and choosing to do otherwise, or trying to do otherwise once having chosen to do so, either of which would sever the link between having a reason and acting on it. I agree with Buss, and would add that circumstances need not determine a person's reasons themselves. The VDC's reasons would be determined were it the case that he could not acquire a moral sensibility and perception, and the DW's reasons would be determined were it the case that she could not be visionary about what morality requires. But, to take the case of the DW, it does not follow from the fact that she has reason to act slavishly because she is taught that she is inferior and believes that servility is self-respecting, that she cannot see herself as having intrinsic worth, and thus cannot recognize reasons of genuine self-respect. She can recognize her worth, but needs to be visionary to do so, and can be so. To believe otherwise seems factually false: some VDCs rise above their horrible circumstances, as many women rise above even intense indoctrination of patriarchal values, recognizing their intrinsic value at least most of the time. They both recognize moral reasons and act on them. I have recognized the difficulty such persons would face in coming to recognize moral reasons, particularly when the person, like the DW, has been a direct victim of a grievous act of sexism. The VDC would have to acquire the sensibility and perception necessary to recognize moral reasons to make them his reasons; the DW would have to be visionary—to see past the sexism she is accustomed to, be reflective about her desires and the principles leading her to them, and reject any morality that viewed servility as self-respecting—to make the reasons against servility her reasons.

Further, Wolf's view is at odds with an empowering view of agency. Wolf seems to suggest that the only basis on which agents should be absolved from responsibility is if they lacked some crucial feature of agency—for example, control over one's actions, rationality, the capacity to act from reasons, the ability to choose among reasons, and having one's reasons not determined by one's circumstances. The last feature on this list is what absolves the VDC. But there is room for another alternative, namely, to have moral agency yet still be directed to, rather than determined by, a certain set of reasons. Wolf's view seems to be that agents like the VDC are, so to speak, at the mercy of the reasons they come to have due to their circumstances, but not ones that result from weighing these reasons against other ones that exist. As Wolf describes it, the agent's will, which I understand to be the faculty that deliberates among reasons, falls out of the picture: the agent lacks a will because he is determined to act only on those reasons he recognizes and cannot act otherwise. He does not choose among reasons because he cannot—not because of faulty rational powers, but because his circumstances determine the reasons he sees. But this view is at odds also with Wolf's view that the VDC "acts on the basis of choice and chooses on the basis of reason." What Wolf must mean by this claim, then, is that an agent like the VDC can decide to act on the basis of the reasons he sees, as opposed to not following reasons at all, perhaps acting on emotion or on a whim. But on this picture of agency, the VDC does not make a choice among reasons, because he is determined to see only one set of reasons and can never see any others. He merely "takes" the reasons that are presented to him by his circumstances, and cannot deliberate about them in any way, making them the product of his will. In the case of women, I worry that this picture of agency comes too close for comfort to Narayan's "dupes of patriarchy" who have a completely pulverized agency.

I think that some agents in circumstances like that of the VDC do choose among reasons (as I will explain later),<sup>2</sup> and that for those who do not, it is not the case that they cannot do so, but just do not do so. This weaker claim, together with a plausible defense of why these agents do not choose and act from moral reasons, may be sufficient for freeing them from responsibility for their wrongdoing. On my weaker view, the DW's socialization directs her to see only one set of reasons rather than reasons for acting in genuinely self-respecting ways. Because she is so directed, she may not have entertained the possibility of alternative reasons, being focused entirely on reasons for acting in ways she mistakenly takes to be self-respecting. In general, for such agents, circumstances interfere with their seeing alternative reasons for action: other persons or society at large direct their wills toward a certain set of reasons and away from other reasons. So they have a will, but it is directed; they can act on alternative reasons, but their circumstances stand in the way of their seeing these reasons. Even though the reasons they act from are their own, we might describe these agents as being manipulated but not coerced by their circumstances to see only these reasons. Notably, such agents differ from those who are not in these circumstances and who see moral and immoral reasons, and choose the latter out of weakness of will, a desire for the bad, and the like. Prima facie, responsibility ascriptions should be made of whatever force directs the agent's reasons, be it her will or something else. If the agent does not see certain reasons, and if it is not the case that we can reasonably expect her to do so given her circumstances, at least some of the responsibility ascription should be applied to the force that stands in her way of seeing all of her reasons. In any case, this is my response to Wolf's deterministic view, but my argument for absolving the DW from responsibility turns on establishing that there are reasons for certain agents with deprived backgrounds to act in ways that we would otherwise deem immoral.

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<sup>2</sup> Narayan believes that Muslim women who choose to wear the burqa recognize alternative sets of reasons and autonomously choose among them though their choices are restricted. She thinks of them not as "dupes of patriarchy," but as "bargainers with patriarchy."

# Buss's Argument

Buss rejects Wolf's deterministic account in favor of "justifying excuses," or, reasons that would excuse a person's wrongful behavior, though the person would still be responsible for her behavior. She examines a series of cases that are modifications of Wolf's case of the VDC. One is the case of the VDC who hits a person who hits him. Buss rightly claims that such a case is self-defense, and that in cases like this, the VDC is completely justified in his action, so not blameworthy, and I take it, not responsible, because his act of self-defense is not a wrongdoing. The other relevant case for us is an embellishment of Wolf's VDC case, according to which the VDC as a child came into contact mostly with people who either beat him, supported those who beat him, or completely ignored his misery. When they beat him, they first taunted him. Years later, when another person taunts him with a hostile, threatening comment, he responds by hitting his taunter. Buss aims to justify what she calls "the Basic Intuition," which states that "simply because they have exceptional backgrounds, certain wrongdoers have a different moral status from that of more 'privileged' wrongdoers who perform the very same type of acts" (Buss 1997, 337). Against Wolf, Buss claims that the Basic Intuition attributes to the victim not an incapacity for making the correct moral distinctions, but a justified failure to "tell right from wrong." The circumstances of the victim of a bad past justify certain beliefs and assumptions that, were they true, would justify (in the sense of giving excusing reasons) his wrongdoing and give him good reason to act wrongly in this case. To be clear, it is not that the VDC just does not see that there is reason to act morally, but that he actually has reason, and is not determined, to act wrongly in certain circumstances. Since Buss wants to make clear that it is not that the victim is justified given his past experience, her view is that anyone in his circumstances has reason to hold certain beliefs and has reason to act the way he acts (350). At the same time, however, he has reason not to act this way, because his act is wrong: there are reasons to act morally. The trick is to show why and when the former reasons outweigh the latter. For Buss, some determining factors are how unacceptable the person's action is, whether the person has more or less available alternatives, and the details of the person's background. I will return to this point for the DW's case. Buss concludes that anyone's having reasons to act in the way the VDC acts when he hits his taunter frees the person from blame though he is still responsible because he committed a wrongdoing.

Buss's argument for the Basic Intuition, which shows that the VDC has reason to commit a wrongdoing, is that such a person would have to be truly exceptional not to take his past experiences as representative of human nature, which would require that he have a special talent for writing off his experiences and not thinking that others deserve to be treated like potential enemies, and that he possess both a virtue that we cannot reasonably expect others to share, and a power of imagination greatly at odds with the reality he knows that he can use to guide his behavior. Buss chalks up to faith—not reason—this victim's believing that the person now yelling at him is not asking to be hit in response (Buss 1997, 355). Finally, she offers this analogy: the victim no more has good reason for thinking that others are not like the hostile people he grew up around than does the person who has been bitten repeatedly by dogs have good reason to think that the growling dog in her path will not bite her (354). Buss's view is that the VDC has reason to hit the taunter because, given his background, every instance of his being taunted was followed by a physical assault—this pattern justifies the VDC's response. If the Basic Intuition is correct, the victim of bad circumstances is at least *prima facie* not blameworthy for acting wrongly. If the DW's circumstances are sufficiently similar to, if not worse than, those of this VDC, by Buss's argument she would be free from blame for her servility. Were her socialization so bad—for example, she was the victim of grievous, sexist acts like rape or repeated sexual harassment,

she met up with mostly sexist people who tried to undermine her worth in their interactions, she was raised in a deeply patriarchal family that let her know in many ways that women were inferior in value to men—we could conclude this.

Since I want to absolve the DW from responsibility, not just free her from blame, I cannot invoke Buss's argument because it does not go far enough in this direction. Buss draws the strong conclusion that the VDC has a sufficient reason to act as he does because his circumstances are ones that would give anyone the same reasons; thus his action is justified (Buss 1997, 338). But she has shown merely that this person is justified in acting wrongly, not that acting wrongly, paradoxically, is itself justified. That is, she has shown that any person has reasons relating to her or his circumstances that override already existing reasons for acting in morally required ways. Stated differently, Buss's argument does not really establish that there is reason for the VDC to act wrongly, but that he has reason to discount the reason to act morally, which is that anyone in his circumstances could not be expected to act morally. To be sure, Buss uses the language of justification, but she means by it that the act is a wrongdoing that is excusable because there is a sufficient reason for doing it stemming from the deprived background of this or similarly situated agents. The main thing separating Buss's account from Wolf's is that for Wolf, the agent is determined by his reasons, while for Buss, the agent has a sufficient reason to act wrongly that frees him from blame. But since this justification frees the agent from blame without entailing that his action be condoned (e.g., hitting a taunter is morally wrong), it is an excuse. And because the agent's having an excuse is a function of his having a reason, this excuse does not exempt him from moral responsibility for his action (Buss 1997, 338).

Although I favor Buss's more rationalistic view over Wolf's deterministic view, I want to go one step further and show that there is a sense in which for victims of deprived backgrounds the act itself—the wrongdoing—is, paradoxically, itself justified. One advantage my view has over Buss's is that excusing reasons focus on the agent and her psychology or her circumstances, either of which suggests that the person's agency is in some way compromised, a point that conservatives are likely to seize on. In battered woman syndrome cases, which focus on the agent's psychology, the victim who kills her abuser is excused but only in exchange for being labeled mentally ill, not a clear victory for women's agency (Teays 1998, 62, 63). In the case of the DW or VDC, though liberals are apt to agree with Buss that they respond completely reasonably given their circumstances, conservatives are likely to object that no matter how bad things get, anyone should rise above their circumstances and act morally. Put another way, conservatives would reject the view that excusing reasons for wrongdoings ever override moral reasons, at least for members of disenfranchised groups. I find the conservative view insensitive, and offer an alternative that is also grounded in a person's circumstances, yet frees her from responsibility for acting in certain ways in light of these circumstances, and in terms of justifying reasons.

# An Alternative Argument

Let us consider a real-life example of a VDC, namely, Aileen Wuornos, a Florida prostitute who was convicted of and executed for killing seven men who sought sexual “services” from her, and whose story is the subject of the 2003 movie, *Monster*. The case of Wuornos is like that of the VDC who is mistreated by his family, but it is also akin to the DW’s case in that both victims are sent messages of inferiority by their society. In Wuornos’s case, these messages reinforced the messages of inferiority that accompany the abuse she experienced as a child. Wuornos was sexually abused at the age of eight by her father’s friend, and when she told her father, he beat her. After years of sexual abuse, she turned to prostitution. When one of her “clients” brutally raped her, she shot him dead.

After this incident, she shot and killed several other men during attempted acts of prostitution, whether or not she feared they would rape or kill her.

Clearly when Wuornos kills the client who brutally rapes her, she is acting in self-defense, and as such, her act is itself justified. Fleshing out the reasons why this response is justified in this case can help us understand the sense in which Wuornos’s killing her other clients may also be itself justified. In the clear case, Wuornos defends her fundamental right to protect her body against invasion or untoward use.<sup>1</sup> She kills instead of, say, castrating the rapist because this is her only real way of fighting back while handcuffed to the steering wheel of his car. She knows that killing in general is morally wrong, but simultaneously is furious about the attack, feels helpless about the situation she is in and about the way society has treated her and how she expects it will treat her were she to file a legal charge, and feels remorse after she kills her attacker.<sup>2</sup> Hers is a response to a most degrading message of inferiority that confirms for her lifelong doubts about her worth as a person. The rapist’s attempt to render inferior her worth as a person essentially aims to put her out of the moral sphere, no longer acknowledging her as a kind of being who is owed certain treatment in virtue of its humanity (Hampton 1999, 123). Such “moral injuries,” as Hampton calls them, send a message to others who do not cause them that they, too, can treat the person in morally injurious ways. They are a death of sorts, and cry out for self-defense. In killing her attacker, Wuornos acts in the best, if not the only, way she can to protect and assert her dignity. She aims to send him and the moral community at large the message that she has intrinsic worth, despite what he believes and tries to make her believe. Killing in self-defense of one’s body and person, whether in response to brutal rape or threat of death, is itself justified in these circumstances because it is a way of protecting and asserting one’s dignity, of asserting that your attacker has no right to try to take you out of the moral community by treating you as he does. Re-described in these terms, the paradox in the claim that “killing is morally justified” is lessened. Even Kant believed that a person’s responding to evil with evil, when done out of self-respect, was in certain circumstances morally permissible.<sup>3</sup>

This point is missing in Buss’s explanation of the case of the VDC. Buss argues that the VDC is not blameworthy for hitting his taunter on the grounds that anyone in his circumstances who was physically assaulted every time they were taunted would have reason to hit back. On my account, what

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Jarvis Thomson says this is a right we have, if we have any rights (see Thomson 1971).

<sup>2</sup> This goes against Wolf’s construal of the VDC, who does not know right from wrong because he lacks the right kind of sensibility and perception.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Korsgaard argues that under non-ideal conditions, if a person violates the Principle of Humanity and treats you as a tool, you may (but not “must”) respond with evil, but in ways constrained by the Universal Law Formulation. Suppose that a murderer wants to kill your friend whom you have hiding in your attic, and asks you where he is. On Korsgaard’s reading of Kant, you owe it to humanity in your own person not to allow your honesty to be used as a resource for evil (Korsgaard 1986b). I do not know what Kant would say about killing in response to brutal rape.

is significant for responsibility is not the pattern in the victim's mind between being taunted and being hit, but that the assault is of a particular kind, one on his dignity, saying that he does not count in the moral community so his attacker and others can treat him as they please. Indeed, this feature is significant for responsibility in the case where a person is hit just once and hits back in self-defense, as a way of putting himself back into the moral community in the eyes of his attacker and others.

Let us apply this reasoning to the murky cases where Wuornos kills the clients who do not rape her but merely use her sexual services. The treatment Wuornos received from her father and his abusive friend, the rapist, and the society at large that devalues prostitutes and women generally, is undoubtedly sufficiently degrading as to make her doubt her status as a full member of the moral community that grants and protects rights. She believes that to convince others of her equal worth, she needs to assert her worth in ways that she would not otherwise, under ideal conditions, need to. Note that she does not target any man as her victim, but only those who seek her sexual services, because they serve as stark reminders that she is a mere object that can permissibly be sexually abused. She may at first see moral reasons not to kill, but with repeated attacks on her dignity she is directed by her circumstances to see only the reasons to act in ways protecting and asserting her dignity when she feels it hopelessly threatened, and does not focus on moral reasons for not killing. She believes she has no choice against a system and a world that would never allow her in as a full-fledged person deserving of respect.

My argument about Wuornos can be supported by I. A. Menkiti's description of the psychopath who becomes a gang-banger or a rioter (Menkiti 1977-1978). Menkiti, following Jeffrie Murphy, understands the psychopath to be someone who comes to be outside the domain of moral discourse: moral judgments have no motivational component for him, he does not care about others or their duties to them, has no concern about others' rights and feelings, does not accept responsibility, and has no guilt, regret, shame, or remorse (Menkiti 1977-1978, 227, citing Murphy 1971-1972, 285, 286). Menkiti examines why some people who are forced to live in generations-long poverty and ghetto conditions that constantly challenge their self-esteem (or self-worth, as I am using the term) become psychopaths. He explains that in the first stage the agent is still in control, struggling to maintain his integrity and hold onto his self-respect. In the next stage, he becomes resentful and bitter, and flouts the normal decencies we expect of others, and in the last stage he exhibits mental poisoning, "no longer being concerned to play the game of life, whose essence morality is" (Menkiti 1977-1978, 231), not respecting the principle of humanity in others because it has been defeated in himself. One significant feature of Menkiti's account is that when the institutions of society are perceived by a person as belittling his worth, the person forms a generalized resentment against society that takes forms such as gang-banging and rioting where the victims may be completely innocent but for their participation in racist (or sexist) institutions. Menkiti concludes that rioters (who are members of racial minorities) "are not roaming bands of hoodlums out to have a good time," as commonly believed, but are persons who are sending a social message through their actions. Similarly, gangs are not a defiance of authority, but rather a reaction to institutional patterns of racial exclusion, a quest for self-worth and identity and for a close-knit supportive community of their own, with mutual confirmation of each other's worth (Menkiti 1977-1978, 241-43). Compare to the VDC, who believes that a taunt will always be followed by a physical assault: gang-bangers, rioters, and, I believe, victims like Wuornos believe that the system, and certain individuals operating within it, will always attempt to lower their intrinsic worth. Because the effects of systems are so pervasive, their assaults on a person's dignity are the bully from which she cannot run. Most significant for our purposes is that, in the words of Menkiti, "Riots [and gang-banging] can be legitimately interpreted as articulate protests against economic deprivation and social exclusion" (241). More generally stated, such acts can be legitimately interpreted as articulate protests against attempts to lower one's intrinsic worth. Menkiti believes that it would be saintly for these victims to suffer and endure, which we should not expect of ordinary persons.

Wuornos, I believe, is in a similar situation to that of the gang-banger or rioter. She perceives that the institutions of society, not just her father and his friend, are belittling her worth. She reacts in ways trying to re-establish her worth to the rapist and to a society that does not value her or any women.

Her victims are her other clients, whom she cannot separate from the rapist because their commonality is their attempt to lower her value by treating her as a mere sex object for purposes of their pleasure.<sup>4</sup> In general, if a person has repeatedly had her dignity assaulted in the past in particular acts, or had it attacked in a grievous way, she is likely to perceive other related acts as attacks on her dignity as well. The VDC believes that taunting will always be followed with his being physically assaulted. Wuornos does not believe that the other acts of sex will lead to rape, but that all the acts of sex with clients are attacks on her dignity. She feels helpless against the world because it, not just her family, has sent her messages of inferiority. The sense in which her plight, and that of the gangbanger and rioter, is similar to Buss's embellished case of the VDC is that there seems to be nowhere for her to turn for validation of her worth. Her killings of her "innocent" clients can legitimately be seen as articulate protests against a world in which she is accorded less value than she deserves in virtue of her humanity. Viewed in this way, her acts of killing can be re-described as acts of asserting her worth in defense of an attack on it. As such, her acts are morally permissible, not just from her perspective, but objectively speaking. They are acts of self-defense, of defending her worth as a person. And it is from this perspective that agents like Wuornos see the acts and the reasons for them. From this perspective such acts are themselves justified. This is what absolves agents like Wuornos and the VDC from responsibility.<sup>5</sup> Circumstances play a role in the re-description of the act from the point of view of the agent and her background in terms of the attempt to lower her intrinsic value. Finally, this account is agency-preserving: it justifies the agent's acting in seemingly immoral ways in terms of justifying reasons rather than either excusing or deterministic reasons, and these reasons represent ways the agent aims to keep herself in the moral sphere as a moral entity deserving of certain treatment despite her circumstances.

Now let us apply this account to the case of the DW. The DW has in common with Wuornos that, like all women, she is sent strong social messages of inferiority. Again, we do not know the particularities of the DW's case to know whether she has been a direct victim of a grievous act of sexism that would make it difficult to deflect its message of inferiority. We do know that her value system is such that it is likely that she was raised to believe that women should serve their families, and that she believes that commonsense morality says it is self-respecting for women to serve their families. Like the other victims, hers is a response to a threat to her intrinsic worth. But such a response can take different forms; unlike the other victims, the DW acts contrary to asserting her dignity, because the very wrongness of her servility consists in its being nonself-respecting. Whereas the gang-banger is on a quest for self-worth, and the rioter protests against his deprivation and exclusion, and Wuornos aims to assert her worth, the DW is confused about her worth and so does not have the self-respect necessary to resist the messages of inferiority directed at her and at women as a group. Instead, she acts in ways that she mistakenly believes assert her worth, as she believes that the right and self-respecting thing to do is to be servile to her husband and family. In her eyes, her worth is tied to her value as a traditional wife and mother, not as a person in the Kantian sense. Were someone to point out her servility to her, she would adamantly deny that she was being servile, stating that she is happy and proud to serve her husband, and believing that all women should be like her. She wants to be respected and to have self-respect, but is confused about what respect entails. She confirms her worth, she believes, by being servile. She is directed by her circumstances to a set of reasons (to be servile) reflecting confusion about her worth. She does not see that there are alternative ways to be because she does not understand what self-respect entails. She acts on reasons of servility, and her servility is justified in the sense that it is a legitimate response to confusion about her worth stemming from (at least) social messages of inferiority that threaten her sense of worth.

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<sup>4</sup> Obviously the other clients are different from the rapist in that they pay her for sex that they believe she willingly engages in for money. But from her perspective, she is not so willing—her circumstances make her believe that she is a sex object for men, and she does not see that she has any other real options.

<sup>5</sup> The U.S. legal system did not agree, as Wuornos was executed for her killings on October 9, 2002 (<http://www.chasingthefrog.com/reelfaces/monster.php>, accessed October 22, 2009).



A few points need clarification. First, Menkiti does not say what constitutes a “legitimate” interpretation of an act as an articulate protest against an attack on one’s dignity. He believes that gang-banging and rioting, both of which are violent, fall into this category, though, to be sure, he does not completely absolve gang-bangers and rioters of responsibility for their actions, but wants to hold society at least partly responsible for their behavior. I want to clarify, first, that I am arguing for absolving of responsibility only those agents whose behavior is a response to an attempt to lower their intrinsic worth. Second, women traditionally have not responded to social messages of inferiority through gang-banging and rioting, though Francine Hughes, who burned to death her abusive partner while he slept, and Wuornos, who killed some of her clients, have responded in more violent ways. Others have tried to challenge the system by breaking into it one small step at a time, and some have followed traditional roles. What constitutes a legitimate interpretation of a protest against an attempt to lower one’s dignity depends on factors such as the nature of the act that attempts to degrade one’s value, how widespread these acts are (i.e., whether the message of inferiority is widely institutionalized or escapable), and the nature of the victim’s response in relation to the act(s) sending the message of inferiority (killing a rapist vs. killing a catcaller or even a mere beneficiary of patriarchy). Third, I caution that we not genderize these responses at the risk of perpetuating sexist stereotypes: if gang-banging is permissible for men, it should be permissible for women, so long as in either case it is a legitimate interpretation of a protest against an attempt to degrade the agent. Finally, I urge that we exercise leniency in our judgment of victims who respond to indirect harms sent by systematic messages of inferiority since these messages are often masked and go unnoticed but can be just as insidious as those sent to victims who suffer direct harms.

One thing to note about the nature of servility is that it does not seem on the face of it to be as bad a wrongdoing as hitting or killing. What, after all, is the harm in being servile? Kant believes that the wrongness of acting in nonself-respecting ways lies both with the person’s acting contrary to humanity, using himself as a mere means, and with his doing so out of inclination. He says that a man should not cringe and fawn because in doing so he degrades his person and loses his manhood, and a liar throws away his personality. Emphasizing the role of inclination, he states that if a man offers his body for profit for the sport of others he throws himself away, and that we cannot without destroying our person abandon ourselves to others in order to satisfy their desires even if it is done to save parents and friends from death, and that still less can this be done for money, as is the case with “the vices of the flesh” (1830/1963, 527-28). But the DW acts not out of inclination, but confusion. Kant also argues that the non-self-respecting person is not able to perform other duties because self-respect is necessary for morality to be possible (527).<sup>6</sup> But the DW is not otherwise immoral, and probably acts in ways that are respectful toward others to whom she feels no sense of servility. Although she may not respect her husband as an equal and so not act morally toward him for the sake of duty, she treats him as superior and does not wrong him. Perhaps, then, the wrongness of her servility lies, contra Kant, in its harming others, particularly the group women, because the DW’s participation in a slavish relationship with her husband perpetuates stereotypes of deference and submission. Whether it does so depends, I believe, on whether one woman’s participation in a sexist practice will have an effect on the group women. And this depends on there being just enough others participating that it makes a difference what she does. But if this is where the wrongness of servility lies, then women have an obligation, at least under certain circumstances, to resist their oppression by not participating in behaviors such as servility (Cudd 2006). Whether women do have such an obligation is beyond the scope of this paper, but I should say that I am a bit skeptical that oppressors will respond to resistance, because they are in a position that licenses them the option of listening to the message of resistance.<sup>7</sup> What is necessary

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<sup>6</sup> The passage states: “He who transgresses against himself loses his manliness and becomes incapable of doing his duty towards his fellows [H]e who transgresses his duty towards himself, can have no inner worth whatever. Thus a man who fails in his duty to himself loses worth absolutely; while a man who fails in his duty to others loses worth only relatively. It follows that the prior condition of our duty to others is our duty to ourselves; we can fulfil the former only in so far as we first fulfil the latter.”

<sup>7</sup> I discuss this issue in more detail in my review of Cudd 2006 in *Journal of Value Inquiry* (forthcoming).

is that they come to see and respect women as equal in value, but I do not think a person should have to resist to establish her worth. In any event, the difficulty in pinpointing the wrongness of the DW's servility lessens the grip of her responsibility.

The larger conclusion to draw from this entire discussion about responsibility is that if someone attacks your dignity, it is not reasonable to expect you not to act to try to assert it and re-establish yourself—in the eyes of yourself, your attacker, and the greater society—in the moral community. Persons who are not confused about their worth might respond more like the VDC, but those who are confused might go the way of the DW. Again, I am not arguing that persons have an obligation to respond—maybe they do, maybe they do not. But *prima facie*, they are not responsible when they respond in certain ways to attacks on their dignity. This is a happy conclusion because holding responsible the DW and others like her for their servility is similar to holding rape victims responsible for being raped—only self-respecting women are exonerated for having the strength of character to carry on in the face of adversity. Focusing on women's moral goodness detracts from the real issue, which is that requiring women's servility maintains the privileged group's power. A self-respecting response is to eliminate practices, institutions, and behaviors that send messages of inferiority, and to reconstruct commonsense morality to praise women who overcome socialization into servility.

## Further Thoughts

An objector might say that if it is unreasonable to expect women with strong socialization to overcome it, the same can be said for men. Thus at least some oppressors are not responsible for their sexist behavior. I cannot fully take up this huge issue here,<sup>1</sup> but I believe that this symmetry is undermined when we acknowledge that overcoming the effects of socialization that engender a lack of confidence in one's moral status, and the psychological suffering that inevitably accompanies it, is more difficult than challenging one's sense of superiority.

More importantly, I have argued that it is not strictly a person's socialization that absolves her from responsibility, but the fact that there is reason to respond to an attack on one's dignity. I made two separate claims about the DW: (1) her socialization likely has been such that it is unreasonable to expect her not to be confused about her worth and (2) it is unreasonable for her and similar victims not to respond in ways based on this confused perception of their worth to an assault on their dignity. We can grant the first, but not the second, claim about men. As men who act in sexist ways are not responding to an attack on their dignity, my argument absolving DW-types from responsibility does not apply to them. These points help explain why Wolf and Buss ask only whether those with deprived backgrounds are exempt from responsibility for wrongdoing.

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss this in *Superson* 2004, 2006, 3.

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