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OPTING-IN: A FURTHER JUSTIFICATION OF ROBIN ZHENG'S ROLE-IDEAL MODEL

by

MEAGAN FRASER

Under the Direction of Andrew I. Cohen, PhD

ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that Robin Zheng's model of accountability, the Role Ideal Model (RIM), overlooks an important distinction. It is not simply "inhabiting that role" that justifies extra reparative burdens for any person. Instead, a person may acquire such burdens only by electing to inhabit that role. I critically assess Zheng's RIM first by offering a friendly amendment to her theory. I highlight a distinction between opt-in roles and what I will call non-voluntary roles. This difference motivates my second point that the RIM can only justify higher claims for redress against those inhabiting opted-in roles, not against those in non-voluntary roles. Whether we opt into a role has normative significance in how we prioritize our "push[ing] of the boundaries" within those roles and what kinds of claims others may make against us (Zheng 877).

INDEX WORDS: Structural injustice, Social roles, Accountability, Responsibility, Voluntarism, Special obligations

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MEAGAN FRASER

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2020

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DEDICATION

For my undergraduate mentor, advisor, and lover of liberty, Dr. Aeon J. Skoble.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Robin Zheng claims that “[w]hat is needed to rectify structural injustice is not (merely) that people modify their individual actions and attitudes, but that we radically transform an entire complex of interlocking structures, i.e. the system itself” (Zheng 870). Zheng recognizes that this seems an impossible responsibility for individuals to bear on their own. She highlights the interesting field that exists between individual and group responsibility. Why is it my responsibility to right the wrongs of everyone else, past, present, and maybe even future? Zheng answers by offering an improvement upon Iris Marion Young’s “Social Connections Model” (SCM). Zheng argues through what she calls her Role-Ideal Model (RIM) that we all must “push the boundaries” of our roles (Zheng 877). As she claims, “we are each responsible for structural injustice through and in virtue of our social roles, i.e. our roles as parents, colleagues, employers, citizens, etc., because roles are the site where structure meets agency” (Zheng 870). The “pushing of these boundaries” is part of what it means to *idealize* a role.

In this paper I do *not* argue that Zheng’s RIM is the way we *should* go about combatting structural injustice. My project is more humble. I simply argue that *if* we choose the RIM as a possible way to combat structural injustice, *then* Zheng’s theory needs to account for the difference between different types of roles in order to justify her theory. It is not simply “inhabiting a role” that justifies a possible reparative burden on a person. Instead, if we adopt the RIM, a person may acquire such burdens only by *electing* to inhabit some specific role. In order to amend Zheng’s RIM and highlight the justificatory power of *choosing* to inhabit a role, I will differentiate between what I call opt-in roles and non-voluntary roles. This distinction motivates my argument that the RIM could only justify extra burdens on those inhabiting opted-in roles, and not on those inhabiting non-voluntary roles. Whether or not we opt into a role has normative

significance in whether we are responsible for “boundary-pushing” within those roles (Zheng 877). This distinction is important because it protects individuals from unjustified role-based obligations.

I begin by providing an overview of Zheng’s model. I first detail what a “social role” is. Second, I set out her notion of responsibility. Third, I explain her RIM. Once Zheng’s theory is clear I then distinguish opted-in from non-voluntary roles. Using examples of each, I consider what sort of boundary-pushing burdens Zheng’s theory justifies. I introduce the notion of idealizing a role as imagining and taking steps to bring about improvements in one’s role and its connection to structural injustice. Ultimately, I argue that *if* the RIM’s claims are justified, then they are only justified with respect to opted-into roles.¹

2 ZHENG’S THEORY

2.1 Social Roles

In this section I will provide an overview of Zheng’s theory. First, I will detail how Zheng defines a “social role.” Then, I will discuss the important distinction she draws between accountability and attributability as it pertains to moral responsibility and structural injustice. And finally, I will introduce Zheng’s RIM as her method of assigning responsibility for structural injustice as well as a way to combat it.

Borrowing from sociological theory (e.g. Dahrendorf 1968) Zheng defines a social role as follows:

A social role R is a set of expectations E – predictive and normative – that apply to an individual P in virtue of a set of relationships P has with others (such that anyone standing in the same type of relationships as P occupies the same R), and

¹ I am indebted to Jackson Kushner for his helpful discussion on this topic.

where E is mutually maintained by P and others through a variety of sanctions. (Zheng 873).

Far from being a sociologist myself, this notion of social roles seems intuitively plausible, but it is undertheorized by Zheng. There are certain roles that exist within a society that have certain normative expectations attached to them. A teacher should teach, a parent should parent, a builder should build, etc. When we witness people fail to fulfill the normative or descriptive expectations of their role, we acknowledge their failure and the expectations that help signal the obligations that being in that role requires. Part of what constitutes certain socially situated roles is that people typically have certain expectations, E , that any occupant of such roles, P , will take certain actions, respond certain ways, or be disposed to certain attitudes. Suppose some person P is a dentist. What it is to be a dentist is a function of some norms and expectations, E , such as: this person knows when and how to fill cavities to prevent tooth decay. The dentist's spouse (also some person P) may be a contract lawyer and follow a different norm or expectation, E , such as knowing how to file a brief. By failing to fulfill these norms in certain ways, both persons would fail to obey the normative and predictive norm E that defines what it is to be a dentist, a lawyer, etc. It is *expected* (by those who know what a dentist and lawyer are) that P fulfills E . The expectation or norm E is part of a larger cluster of norms that aids in defining that specific role R . On Zheng's theory, the way roles are socially situated is a function of what people are expected to be doing in those roles, and therefore what others may justifiably expect. The failure to follow these norms justifies a kind of reproach that would otherwise be unjustified.² The fact that an individual is in the role of dentist and failed to follow expectation E

² The claim that the mere presence of expectations justifies others' claims is controversial and not without substantive objection. For the sake of this exposition I am bracketing it for now and am merely reporting Zheng's view.

means the community may impose sanctions in a decidedly different way than had the individual not been a dentist. When the dentist fails to obey these norms, we recognize that these norms are attached to the role. This recognition illustrates how “being a dentist,” as any “social role,” is understood and maintained through sanctions. There are different sorts of sanctions of different scopes, intensities, structures, and involvement. Much depends on what the dentist did or did not do. Making bad jokes or being humorless elicits some informal sanctions. Concocting needs for dental work would produce other sanctions, some of which might be formal ones by regulatory bodies. Fondling people under anesthesia would produce others. Installing crowns that need replacement after one year would produce others.³ And so on.

The sanctions we dole out help to define and enforce the norms that constitute the role. We might want to imagine our previous dentist being fired as a sanction for failing to meet expectations. But the sanctioning of social roles is not always so officially distributed, especially in cases of unique, socially contextualized roles.

Consider the somewhat odd practice that takes place in the city of Boston every winter. As residents of the city dig their cars out from feet of snow, they often place a folding chair in the freshly cleared parking spot. For native Bostonians, if you put in the effort to dig out a parking space, then the spot is yours. This is communicated via the folding lawn chair taking up the space while the owner is away at work/running errands/etc. For those who inhabit the role of Boston driver, there exists (or previously existed) an expectation or norm not to move folding chairs from hard earned parking spaces (Enwemeka).⁴ If one fails to abide by this norm, they might be sanctioned in the form of an aggressive note or perhaps even deflated tires. These social

³ Thanks to Andrew I. Cohen for this point.

⁴ The norms on this practice blend legal and informal social norms and are in flux. I concede that while some neighborhoods have banned the practice, and some allow it but only for a certain number of hours after a snowfall, this only shows that norms can change and with those changes come corresponding changes to the sanctions.

sanctions help both to communicate and constitute what it means to be in the role of a Bostonian car owner in the winter.

Sanctions can be official, or they can be socially subtle, but they nonetheless help to ensure compliance with certain norms in light of the social role one inhabits. How these sanctions (and the standing to sanction) are justifiably distributed on the RIM is determined by the social roles the individual inhabits and what norms are contained in those roles. By highlighting the norms that help constitute differing roles, Zheng is able to investigate how these norms might affect the interconnected structures of a society. Zheng is particularly eager to explore how occupants of certain roles can challenge the norms constituting their roles to do additional work aimed at moral progress.

Zheng draws on her accounts of norms and sanctions to formulate a way to combat structural injustice through what she calls “ready-made” social roles (Zheng 873). What I have attempted to illustrate in the previous paragraphs is how, on Zheng’s view, sanctions are partly constitutive of social roles. Accordingly, Zheng treats many social roles as catalysts for the moral progress she advocates.

2.2 Accountability

Once Zheng establishes what she means by a “social role” she can move forward in her project. Because Zheng is concerned with understanding responsibility for structural injustice, she sees the social roles we inhabit as occupying a unique position between structure and individual agency. She recognizes that with an issue as large and interconnected as structural injustice, it is difficult to determine the extent to which an individual is accountable. Unlike other conceptions of structuralist responsibility,⁵ Zheng thinks that whether an individual’s action

⁵ See, for example, Iris Marion Young’s “Social Connections Model” of responsibility.

makes a causal difference or not is beside the point; their performance of roles partially constitutes the unjust structure. Therefore, that individual “is accountable ... for that social structure, and when it is unjust, they appropriately bear the burdens of reforming it” (Zheng 874). In this section I will begin to parse the meaning and significance of Zheng’s conception of accountability within which she draws a distinction between accountability and attributability.

It is important to note that the *responsibility* Zheng discusses does not imply blameworthiness or culpability. Unlike in cases of *attributability* in which a wrong was clearly performed by an agent who is blameworthy, “[a]ccountability, concerns a moral and political (rather than metaphysical) problem. When a person fails to carry out a duty, the burdens of redress must be distributed across the community somehow or other; and it is sometimes appropriate to place burdens on an agent even if the noncompliance with a duty did not result from a faulty exercise of agency” (Zheng 872-73).⁶

In cases of both accountability and attributability there is a failure to carry out a duty. My stealing of an object is *attributable* to me because I failed to carry out the duty of respecting another’s property rights. Similarly, I can be held *accountable* for a car accident that happened even when responsibly driving my friend’s vehicle, because I failed in my duty to not damage another’s car (Zheng, “Attributability, Accountability, and Implicit Bias” 66). The difference for Zheng is that in the case of attributability, the failure to carry out a duty *belongs* to the agent. “[O]ur actions ‘belong’ to us in the appropriate way, that is, when those actions are authentic or autonomous” (Zheng, “Attributability, Accountability, and Implicit Bias” 64).⁷ Because the

⁶ Some believe you can’t have a decent moral and political claim without some metaphysical assumptions. I recognize this concern but settling it is outside the scope of this, and Zheng’s paper.

⁷ “It is an agent’s endorsement of the principles or motives on which she acts that makes it ‘her’ action, and that makes her into a full-blooded agent rather than a mere cause” (Zheng, “Attributability, Accountability, and Implicit Bias” 64).

failure belongs to her, we can make claims about this person's moral character as a result of her attributable acts. Accountability, on the other hand, does not necessitate the agent owning the noncompliance with duty.⁸ It is simply that "when a person's action brings about some negative consequences for others, this generates a social problem that simply cannot go unaddressed. These costs must be picked up somehow and by someone, even if there is no bad intention or fault on the part of the person involved, because there are victims who deserve redress" (Zheng, "Attributability, Accountability, and Implicit Bias" 66).⁹ Zheng does not provide an argument as to *why* the negative consequences constitute a social problem nor does she explain why they *must* be addressed by someone. However, perhaps if I place Zheng's claim in yet another conditional, my own project, at the very least, may proceed. *If* a community wishes to distribute burdens of redress to victims in cases where no one is culpable or blameworthy, *then* assigning the redress in accordance with relevant social roles is one good way to be consistent with a just distribution.

If we accept Zheng's claim that victims deserve redress in these cases without a specifiable wrongdoer, then we must determine who pays for the redress. Unlike a case in which a victim is harmed and seeks compensation from the wrongdoer, the burdens of compensation for the harms of structural injustice are less easily assigned. Because there is no individual wrongdoer in cases of structural injustice, Zheng claims, the burdens for redress instead should fall on those who support a society's basic structure.¹⁰ That tends to be many or all citizens if not many or all humans everywhere. Distributing burdens amongst citizens regards them as

⁸ I am indebted to Andrew I. Cohen for helping explicate Zheng's distinction between accountability and attributability.

⁹ I would like to highlight that Zheng is quite inconsistent on this point. She says that on her theory it does not matter if an act makes a "causal difference" (874).

¹⁰ See, for example, Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, pgs. 6-8. There is some dispute about the scope of the basic structure of society being global or restricted to nation states. I am not going to resolve this issue. Here I only note that the basic structure that Zheng seems to be discussing is most akin to a nation state's basic structure.

accountable for bearing the burden of correcting the harms imposed by the structure, even though they may have played no part in bringing about those harms. If people are harmed because of an unjust structure, according to Zheng they are then owed some kind of redress for their harm moving forward. Because on Zheng's account the victims are owed something, she offers her theory as a basis for determining who pays for the wrongs. On her account, those who bear reparative burdens are those inhabiting the roles that help to "constitute" the structure. Because there is no culpable wrongdoer and the theory looks to the roles that constitute that structure, Zheng's proposed theory is forward-looking: it does not focus on assigning responsibility for past harms. Instead it assigns responsibility to those acting in the roles in order to improve conditions moving forward.

If redress is owed to victims of structural injustice on this forward-looking basis, Zheng claims that it *should* come from the individuals according to their "role-ideal." On this view, it is the moral duty of those now occupying those roles to participate in the reform and redress. While it is often impossible to attribute blame to individual citizens for particular structural injustices, it is possible according to Zheng for those who exist in a role, and therefore have contributed to the overall structure, to be held *accountable* (Zheng, "Attributability, Accountability, and Implicit Bias" 62-89). Taking a page from the structural-functionalists,¹¹ Zheng compares the nature of a structure to that of an organism. "An organism [is] composed of head, limbs, organs, and so on functioning together to ensure biological survival. Role differentiation is what makes it possible for the assorted members of a society to carry out, in a structured and coordinated way, all the functions necessary for society to sustain itself" (Zheng 874). If I were to strike someone in the arm, I would be responsible. I cannot chop off my arm and claim it as responsible independent of

¹¹ (Black 1961; Parsons 1951/1991).

myself. My body and mind contributed to the wrongful act simply by being a part of me. Similarly, a police officer, just by being a police officer, is helping to sustain the overall structure and is therefore in a position to provide some kind of remedy to the structure's impacts. Even if the officer did not actively partake in any unjust act, she cannot be separated from the overall structure. The person who is the police officer occupies a role that determines the array of possible actions she should take, for example, volunteering to undergo implicit bias training. While Zheng assigns accountability to everyone, each individual can (and should) determine how she is best poised to remedy some features of the unjust structure. In virtue of the roles each person inhabits and the structure such roles help to constitute, each person becomes susceptible to the burden to "push the boundaries" of their roles towards justice through a "role-ideal" (Zheng 873-75).

2.3 RIM

If it is the case that we want to combat structural injustice, then the best way to do so, according to Zheng, is through her model of accountability, the Role-Ideal Model (RIM). As a model of accountability, the RIM attempts to answer the question of exactly what an individual should do in order to make an impact on a large and dispersed problem. The RIM dictates that individuals are accountable for structural injustice in virtue of their social roles, and that they should act accordingly. It is Zheng's belief that roles come "ready-made... with a suite of features that make it eminently suitable for addressing structural injustice" that make her theory an improvement on Iris Marion Young's Social Connections Model (Zheng 873). The suite of features Zheng seems to be talking about in this case are the "designated role-segments." Though Zheng does not offer a definition, role-segments seem to be the particular relationships one has with others through one's role. For example, all teachers have various relationships with their

students, faculty, the principal, superintendent, etc., and those relationships exist in virtue of that particular role. While an individual teacher has a particular relationship with her specific superintendent, that role-segment remains a “definitive element” for the role (Zheng 873). According to Zheng, there are “intelligible and appropriate” behaviors that constitute these relationships (Zheng 874). And, on her RIM, individuals are therefore “responsible for fulfilling their social roles, where the expectations of each role spell out certain duties to be performed and certain sanctions to be incurred in the event of non-performance” (Zheng 874).

The RIM requires individuals to “push” their conception of what it takes to be good in their roles. Zheng refers to “pushing the boundaries” of one’s role without much explanation of what she means. It is unclear whether the RIM simply requires one to think about what is required of them to be a good X or whether it requires they do that *and* act accordingly. The most charitable reading of Zheng suggests the latter, for if Zheng is consistent in her claim that individuals “appropriately bear the burdens of reforming [the structure]” then the “pushing of boundaries” seems to require action. I will refer to this idea of boundary pushing and conceptualizing of one’s role-ideal as *idealization*, or idealizing one’s role. The responsibility to be a good X (as determined by the first step in an individual’s boundary pushing) also means that when an agent fails to act in accordance with their role-ideal that they are neglecting a moral responsibility. To neglect one’s moral responsibility in the case of the role-ideal means that the individual is not actually concerned with being a good X. And that, according to Zheng, is inconsistent with our moral psychology. Given the wide array of roles every individual occupies, she must want to be good at one, and therefore would naturally undertake the burdens dictated by

the RIM.¹² For example, if an individual's conception of an ideal judge requires she do X (X being beyond the minimal amount required by the social role), then if she fails to do X she has failed to push the boundaries of her role under the RIM. We might even require this kind of act (or something like it) as a condition of calling her a *good* judge. For Zheng, the fact that the role of judge plays a part in the overall unjust structure is enough to justify citizens' claims for the judge to push the boundaries of the role. Zheng writes that "[o]n the RIM, it is this simultaneous psychological and normative force of role-ideals that connects individual agency to social structure in such a way as to ground moral responsibility" (Zheng 875). Zheng seems to think that because individuals already have the psychological desire to be good at (some) of their roles, that this grounds the normative claim that they are responsible for structural injustice in virtue of that role.

Zheng's theory also places a unique emphasis on individuality. The RIM calls on individual citizens to idealize their specific roles as that role relates to the unjust structure. A person's "role ideal" is their "personal conception of what makes a good [role]" (Zheng 875). According to Zheng, people usually want to perform their roles well; and a part of performing a role well is considering the ideal performance of it. There are many different ways to perform a role well, thus resulting in a variety of these "role-ideals." For example, being a good judge minimally requires knowing the law, among other things. But an individual judge's conception of what makes a *good* judge, for example, might require that she spend her free time developing a specialty in order to help better transition criminals out of the system. In doing so, she hasn't just pressed the boundaries of what it takes to be good in her role, but she has exercised agency.

¹² "[I]ndividuals are typically highly motivated to act in accordance with at least some of their role-ideals. When a person identifies with a role (usually through socialization) it becomes intrinsically gratifying to satisfy role expectations; this is part of what enables roles to preserve social structure" (875).

The judge is in a unique position to know all the relevant information needed in order to decide how best to “push the boundaries” of *her* role. Perhaps the judge has a particular interest in minimizing repeat offenders. Meanwhile, another judge who enjoys playing kickball in his spare time may idealize his role and decide he needs to do more community outreach and so organizes a community kickball game. The point is that the RIM allows agents to act as agents while partaking in a project that often runs the risk of mandating and regulating across the board. Under the RIM the judge might have the duty to “push the boundaries,” but she has discretion in what that looks like.

Unlike other theories of distributing responsibility, instead of a one size fits all approach, the RIM requires an individual to use his or her own strengths to idealize the role that has partly “constituted” (Zheng 874) the unjust structure.¹³ The RIM simply dictates he or she *should* embark on the reparative process through her role because she is accountable. Unlike cases of widespread policy change and mandatory training, the RIM allows for certain freedom in how to carry out one’s duty.

The freedom allotted to individuals in how they carry out their duty on the RIM protects this view from a common objection. Consider the concern of overly politicized specialties. Stanley Goldfarb wrote of his concern over the emphasis placed on ‘social justice’ within medical education in the *Wall Street Journal*. He worries that while students are learning about the inequities of the healthcare field and how to address them, they are failing to adequately learn life-saving medical knowledge (Goldfarb). The RIM seems not to be committed to such a problem. Because it is individualized and not institutional, individuals should take on the specific burdens of their choosing in addition to their responsibilities, not instead of them. A medical

¹³ Zheng writes that unlike the SCM, “on the RIM, by contrast, whether an individual’s action makes a causal difference or not is beside the point: their performance of roles partially constitutes the unjust structure (874).”

student required to take a certain number of social justice classes in order to graduate is quite different from a cardiac surgeon *choosing* to take on more pro bono cases with patients from disadvantaged communities. The act of the cardiac surgeon seems to be an act of full agency. On Zheng's view, the cardiac surgeon should do this (or whatever activity she deems appropriate) because (a) she is accountable for structural injustice in virtue of her specific role's contributions to an unjust structure, and, (b) she saw this as *her* best way to combat structural injustice.

The cardiac surgeon choosing to take on more pro bono cases is one example of how she could idealize her role. She might do a number of other things associated with her role as a cardiac surgeon (such as talking to high school students about how to become a surgeon) that could equally satisfy the contextualized and individualized requirements of the RIM. In this case, the boundary pushing does not necessarily require certain *particular* actions beyond those that are essentially associated with that role. We can imagine that beyond the traditional role of cardiac surgeon there exists a range of many possible ways in which one could idealize that particular role. The idea of a range is not Zheng's, though it is consistent with her view that roles generate certain expectations.¹⁴ It's unclear what can and cannot exist in a role's range, though it seems that on Zheng's view that a role's range be minimally related to the *aim* of that particular role. The aim of being a teacher is minimally to teach and the range of possible idealizations should be loosely traceable to that main aim. For example, we shouldn't conceptualize the cardiac surgeon idealizing to stay after work to teach kids math. That would be outside the range

¹⁴ "By reflecting on the constitutive role-segments of a given role, i.e. the specific forms of power, capital, or demands to which one is entitled in the relationship through that role, one can carve out a range of potential boundary-pushing actions" (Zheng 880).

of her role and belongs in the range of say, a teacher's role ideal. How one chooses and acts from within this range of choices is up to them on the RIM.

2.4 A Critique

Despite the room for individuality, Zheng's individualized approach has its weaknesses. It leaves the theory open to the objection that it fails to provide any rubric for specifying what to do when individuals disagree about what their role-ideal requires, or what to do when individuals are clearly mistaken about what a role-ideal requires.¹⁵ Zheng briefly addresses this objection at the end of her paper, writing,

It is true that the RIM does not itself adjudicate between competing role-ideals. But it is not the job of a theory of responsibility to issue such judgments: we do not get answers to such substantive questions for free. A theory of responsibility will not tell us what our first-order duties are ... but only the conditions under which, and the grounds on which, our failing to uphold those duties makes us appropriately subject to sanctions/burdens (Zheng 883).

While Zheng might think her theory withstands this objection, it is hard to identify the kinds of burdens we would place on those who seem to idealize incorrectly. Whatever underlying ethical theory we plug into the RIM is what informs whether someone has incorrectly idealized her role. For example, consider the kickball playing judge from our previous example. Looking at the American judiciary's history of jailing African Americans disproportionately to whites, he may conclude that his idealized role of judge requires him to find all his white defendants guilty. This idealization might be impermissible under certain ethical theories, but justifiable under others. Some utilitarians might justify the infringement on a certain person's

¹⁵ Zheng writes that "[r]ole-ideals are importantly different from social roles because the content of social roles is in large part intersubjectively shared, whereas role-ideals can vary greatly from person to person. While M may believe that a good teacher maintains clear and professional boundaries with students... N may believe that a good teacher behaves like one of the guys... M and N may construct different role-ideals because they have different pedagogical priorities, or because they possess different social identities (e.g. gender, age, nationality) that raise different student-facing challenges" (875).

rights in order to enact the greater gains from structural changes required by the RIM. Therefore, whatever ethical theory we choose to dictate our first order duties will have repercussions for the RIM.

I offer no detailed solution other than invoking a conception of negative rights as a constraint on this process.¹⁶ A person's role-ideal cannot lead to the violation of someone's negative rights. Therefore, the judge cannot jail whites who are not given due process and found guilty because doing so would violate their rights against false imprisonment. But parents also cannot idealize their roles parents in ways that are abusive or violate the child's safety. Nor can an activist commit unjust violence as an idealization of their activism. Zheng may think that her theory is not committed to a single, substantive moral theory, but it should be bound by some principle that means we have made a mistake if 1) our idealization violates someone else's basic negative rights, and 2) we find we must sanction individuals for not violating other people's basic negative rights.¹⁷ If we do not include some such constraints, the theory will have implausible and unacceptable implications. For example, we need some mechanism for claiming the environmental scientist is wrong if her role-ideal suggests murdering half the population to slow the rate of climate change. However, it's perfectly permissible if her role-ideal suggests she

¹⁶ Some might challenge whether rights can be understood without first appealing to some other social/political/ethical theorizing to figure out what rights we have. But any theory of responsibility would require some understanding of equal negative rights. If there exists no right to individual bodily autonomy, then it would seem odd to be suggesting a theory of responsibility for sanctioning people when rights violations occur. I bracket this discussion by acknowledging that the main claim in my paper is not to offer a solution to this problem, but to highlight a different problem with Zheng's theory. No part of my critique of Zheng's account rests on this solution being accepted nor fully defended here.

¹⁷ What I mean here is that if Zheng is correct that all her theory tells us is how and when to sanction others as it pertains to structural injustice then it seems like without some constraints on the theory we could sanction activists who do not use violence to advance their message.

encourage her friends and family to recycle. The difference between these two things, minimally, seems to be that the permissible action does not violate anyone's negative rights.

Even if Zheng invoked a conception of negative rights to ward off this objection, the individuality of her theory has its limits. Despite the freedom the RIM affords to individuals in *how* they idealize, the RIM still requires individuals to idealize all of their roles indiscriminately. Zheng writes that “[t]here is a sense in which accountability for injustice is extremely demanding, because one is required to pursue it in all of one's roles” (Zheng 880) but that we should not worry, since “performing a role well *always* requires this kind of time and effort” (Zheng 881). And, as Zheng herself claims, individuals naturally have a desire to perform their roles well. The truth of whether or not such desires are natural aside, even if individuals wanted to perform all of their social roles well, it still remains unclear why they *should* be required to undertake the special obligation to “include some assessment of whether and how [the role] contributes to structural injustice” (Zheng 881). What grounds the claim that anyone owes it to others to take on some kind of burden beyond the natural duties they owe everyone?¹⁸ Zheng doesn't seem to have a clear answer. She supposes there are certain strong moral burdens we bear to provide repair. But she builds in too much to the mere cluster of norms that define a role while omitting crucial dimensions of choice. This is why I believe Zheng's theory must be amended to ground the normative claims she wishes to make in whether the role counts as voluntary. I claim that the theory should account for whether the individual *voluntarily* choose if

¹⁸ Zheng's use of “claim” needs clarification. She writes that “on the RIM, every person is subject to claims to act in ways that constitute changing the system,” (879) and “the RIM explicates how and why there are moral claims on all of us at any given time to exercise our individual agency throughout the system” (878). While there exist these claims, it is unclear if there are corresponding claimants. Individuals might not be able to claim any benefits from certain idealization, but they can minimally claim that one *ought* to idealize their role.

he or she was in the role, and therefore that specific range of possible idealizations, in the first place, and I will explain why in the following section.

3 VOLUNTARISM

In this section on voluntarism I will begin by providing a brief sketch of the philosophical tradition of voluntarism, what it is, and its use in justifying normative claims. I will then outline and endorse Diane Jeske's brand of voluntarism for the following two reasons: 1) it explains the justification of special obligations, and 2) it conceptualizes voluntarism as "genuine choice," even when choices are constrained, and shows why this conceptualization has normative force (Jeske 128). And finally, I will address Jeske's criticisms of role-obligations, as presented by Michael Hardimon, and show that her criticisms do not apply to my project.

Special obligations are those an individual may owe to another beyond the basic, agent-neutral obligations we owe to all persons. As Jeske writes, special obligations are "obligations over and above those owed to all persons in virtue of their intrinsic nature or those that we have to promote intrinsically valuable states of affairs" (Jeske SEP). Voluntarism is a view about the origin of special obligations. According to voluntarism, such special obligations arise *only* through some antecedent voluntary action. For instance, other things equal, I am not obligated to pay rent to my brother's landlord. However, I am obligated to pay rent to my landlord. I have this obligation through contract. I assumed such contractual obligations voluntarily.

Voluntariness is a condition of my coming to be bound by some special obligation, such as the one I owe to my landlord to pay rent. This obligation is unlike the natural duties or obligations I owe to everyone to respect their autonomy and to forbear violating their various negative rights.

The obligation to pay rent is special. It is special, or extra, in that it is agent-relative and not owed to everyone like those agent-neutral duties I owe to all.¹⁹

The obligations that arise from what I will call *non-voluntary* roles, and by that I mean not voluntary, cannot be justified in the same way as the agent-neutral duties everyone has. A necessary condition for persons to be bound by some special obligation is that they voluntarily accepted it. Bringing special obligations to Zheng's account, I shall argue that the burdens to push boundaries within a role arise only when voluntarily choosing to enter a specific role, or relationship.

3.1 Jeske's Voluntarism

Jeske advances a voluntarist account of moral obligation in her *Rationality and Moral Theory: How Intimacy Generates Reasons*. She argues that special obligations are justified by normatively significant intimate relationships that people voluntarily inhabit (Jeske 126-134). Jeske differentiates between special obligations and what she calls natural duties. Natural duties are "moral requirements which apply to all men [and women] irrespective of status." She also refers to them as objective agent-neutral reasons. Special obligations are instead obligations "that we have only to a limited subset of persons and are a function of our status or acts performed." According to Jeske, "special obligations seem to correlate with...objective agent-relative reason" (Jeske 126). For example, I have certain moral obligations to my friend in virtue of making a commitment to be in a voluntary relationship (Jeske 127). This commitment might mean I have a special obligation to my friend to dissuade her from calling an ex-boyfriend. Whatever special

¹⁹ Such special obligations are also traditionally used to refer to a particular way of justifying political authority and obligation. Following the tradition of Locke and Hobbes, A. John Simmons writes that political voluntarism is committed to the tenet that the "political obligations of citizens can be grounded only in the voluntary transfer of rights from citizen to government" (Simmons 19). My project, unlike Simmons', is not to prove or disprove the legitimacy of the state. Instead, I am concerned with the way special obligations are justified through voluntarily inhabiting a role in a way similar to the project of political philosophers.

obligation I owe her gets its justificatory power from the fact that I made a voluntary commitment to the relationship.²⁰ According to Jeske, it is this voluntary, intimate commitment to and with my friend that grounds my moral duties to her, i.e., those moral duties that go above/beyond those we would otherwise have to any random person. And following from this, Jeske denies that “we have duties of gratitude, where duties of gratitude are grounded on the mere *receipt* of benefits” (Jeske 134). Instead, what grounds these moral obligations is a commitment one makes to another in which that commitment gives rise to the kind of partiality allowed by commonsense morality.²¹ We may act partially towards those we have made commitments to, and we also have special obligations to them because of said commitments. The special obligations we undertake in our committed relationships are an expression of our agency. Unlike recent theories that have looked to narrow the field of what we consider to be of moral concern,²² Jeske views friendship and fulfilling the multitude of commitments one has as a moral project. Special obligations may arise from our voluntary choices and commitments, but fulfilling those obligations is of a moral concern.

While Jeske’s main argument centers on how intimate relationships generate reasons, her reply to antivoluntarists is important for her project and to my own. She sets out what she calls the “Voluntarist Requirement on Special Obligations” as “the only way to acquire special obligations... [is] through some voluntary action(s) such that we know or ought to know that

²⁰ Jeske acknowledges that her view of special obligations in cases of friendship might seem misplaced. She responds, writing “the voluntary assumption of a role need not occur in a discrete act or in some predetermined series of acts that is identifiable from one case to another. It is true that in friendship we sometimes have a sudden realization that we are now friends with some person, a fact that appears more like a discovery than a choice. But what is being discovered in such cases is what we have in fact chosen through acts that we have voluntarily chosen to engage in” (129).

²¹ It is this commitment that makes the trolley problem so much more difficult when it is a family member tied to the tracks.

²² See, for example Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf. Jeske writes that “worries about over-reflecting on the nature of one’s relationships, both considered in themselves and relative to other considerations (in particular, moral considerations), has been what I regard as a worrisome development in contemporary moral theory” (Jeske 130).

such action(s) constitutes the assumption of such obligations” (Jeske 127). With Jeske’s voluntarist requirement, we have special moral obligation *M* only if when we act, we plausibly understand we thereby acquire *M*. When I enter into a friendship, I plausibly commit to caring about my friend in a stronger and uniquely different way than my natural duties require I care about everyone as autonomous individuals.

Voluntarist arguments are best exemplified in uncontroversial cases. For instance, suppose one signs the lease under ordinary conditions free of undue duress or threat. In such a case the individual has consented to pay an agreed upon rent in order to live in a specific place. They only owe paying rent to their landlord because they voluntarily consented to that obligation. Their signing of the lease places certain expectations and obligations upon them, namely paying rent. The individual is not obligated to pay someone else’s rent. Not only is my not owing someone else’s rent unremarkable, but what makes it unremarkable is that I did not *consent* to making their payment. The special obligation to pay rent comes from an agent’s *voluntary* action.

The careers we choose serve as good examples of how we only acquire special obligations by certain sorts of voluntary actions. Becoming an EMT means not only that you consent to the special obligation of administering medical treatment while on the clock, but that people are justified in holding you to that special obligation while you are on the clock. It is not permissible for an EMT assigned to an accident scene to show up to the scene and read a true crime novel. Instead, the EMT is expected to tend to the injured. It is reasonable for those witnessing the scene to expect this from the EMT *because* she is in a role that has placed a specific burden, that of tending to the wounded in this specific case, upon her. We presume, correctly, that she has consented to the job of being an EMT and has certain responsibilities that

correspond with that choice. Likewise, when someone becomes an EMT, they are not voluntarily agreeing to teach their patients how to read.²³ That separate obligation would not arise simply by choosing to become an EMT. It would only arise from another choice.²⁴ The jobs we take on, in virtue of being voluntary choices, help constrain the kinds of claims others can make upon us. When someone quits a job, their previous boss can no longer require them to do certain tasks or jobs. But whether the special obligations that no longer exist stemmed from the contractual agreement between employee and employer being broken, or from the choice the employee made to leave said role is a concern I need to address with care as I rely so heavily on Jeske.

3.1.1 Jeske's Critique of Roles

My reliance on Jeske's voluntarism and the discussion of roles invite an important potential objection. To any reader of Jeske, my use of her argument in order to further a role-based model is worrisome considering her own refutation of Michael Hardimon's "Role Obligations." Suggesting that special obligations are derived from roles, Jeske writes,

In today's world, divorce and remarriage have forced us to reconsider our moral understandings... This suggests that our understanding of the roles as 'socially defined' does not precede or ground our moral judgments about what people in those roles owe one another. Rather, it is the other way around... So appeal to institutional roles as basic in this context is wrongheaded: what we hope is to get our institutions to track our value and other moral judgments. So the notion of some social role does not seem to be basic in generating reasons in the same way that intimacy does seem basic (Jeske 145).

It is at this point that I must draw an important distinction between Jeske's project and mine. I am not trying to ground all of our special obligations through roles per se. Where she and Hardimon disagree is on the basic source that generates special obligations. For Hardimon, that

²³ I leave open the possibility that an EMT could spend his days off teaching kids to read. It is only that the EMT does not owe it to the children to do so in virtue of his being an EMT.

²⁴ Thanks to Andrew I. Cohen for his help on clarifying this point.

source is roles; for Jeske, that source is intimate relationships (which we enter voluntarily). I argue these aren't as different as Jeske seems to think, at least on Zheng's view. Hardimon's assertion that socially defined roles precede our moral judgments about what people owe one another can and should be reversed, but this doesn't mean we should throw out the notion of roles altogether, nor should we think roles are all that different from relationships. In fact, Zheng herself understands roles as not only being constitutive of norms and expectations, but of relationships. Recall that Zheng defines a social role **R** as "A social role **R** is a set of expectations **E** – predictive and normative – that apply to an individual **P** in virtue of a set of relationships **P** has with others" (Zheng 873). The only difference, and the difference that motivates this paper, is that those relationships we have with others should be voluntarily chosen for Zheng's claim to stand. I anticipate Jeske and Hardimon resisting this argument but for the sake of this paper, roles and relationships seem interwoven enough to quiet Jeske's initial aversion to roles. However, this is not the only potential problem with my voluntarist argument. Determining what choices individuals make qualify as voluntary is an uphill battle. It is important to consider the way in which certain choices are made and how extenuating circumstances can transform their moral power. In the next section, I will address one of the most important objections facing a voluntarist account: how to we treat choices that appear constrained?

3.1.2 Constrained Choice Objection

Without ascending into a discussion about free will, it is important to consider the objection that there are varying degrees of voluntarism in more complex cases. For example, would we wish to say that a single mom of three *voluntarily* works three minimum wage jobs in order to feed and clothe her children? Or perhaps this kind of voluntariness is of a different kind,

a choice among constrained options.²⁵ And if this is the case, perhaps whatever special obligations we derive from the choice look different. For the sake of this thesis it is important to clarify exactly how I am using the term *voluntary* as well as what is at stake in these differing cases of voluntariness. Voluntarism is not committed to the idea that *everything* is chosen by an individual, nor does it say that an individual's level of choice is always the same. Instead, as a voluntarist, I offer a thin account of voluntariness as any action that is not made through a threat of violence or harm. These voluntary choices are the choices that justify special obligations. I will draw upon Matt Zwolinski and his work on the morally transformative nature of choice in order to detail the normative significance of voluntary action. I will also consider another popular objection to the voluntarist project, made by Samuel Scheffler, in which he claims voluntarists fail to account for the communal and socially dependent nature of our decision-making processes. I will respond specifically to Samuel Scheffler's critique and argue that a choice can be voluntary even in light of the influence of unchosen factors.

Samuel Scheffler famously rejects voluntarism on the grounds that it ignores how the "influence on our personal histories of unchosen social relations--to parents and siblings, families and communities, nations and peoples--is not something that we determine by ourselves" (Scheffler). Likewise, Jeske admits that "[t]he commitments that each of us ends up making are influenced a great deal by background factors that we have not chosen and may not have had any control over" (Jeske 128). However, she disagrees that this would in any way make the choice less than just that, a choice. For example, Jeske acknowledges that her decision to become an academic was a result of her family's valuation of intellect and her mother's insistence that her daughter be satisfied in her career and financially independent; none of these

²⁵ Thank you to S.L. Dwyer for raising this objection.

were chosen by Jeske herself. But the fact that her choice to become an academic did not “occur in a vacuum does not alter its status as a genuine *choice*” (Jeske 128). Jeske lists other careers that would have also met the criteria established by her family. But even with the influence of her family and her own disposition, Jeske’s choice would still be considered a voluntary, “genuine” choice (Jeske 128). It just so happens that she as the agent had parents and did not grow up in a vacuum.

Scheffler criticizes voluntarism for resting on an unrealistic understanding of choice. Let us take that criticism one step further in order to provide a more satisfying answer to situations with more constrained choices. It does not seem implausible to reply to Jeske by suggesting her options were more desirable and plentiful than those of people in more difficult circumstances. Let’s consider instead a single mother working three minimum wage jobs. The choices the single mother has limit her voluntariness in a way that seems more morally significant than Jeske choosing between being an academic, architect, or actuary (Jeske 128). The mother has three other agents she is responsible for and a limited set of choices that are compatible with her being able to care for her children. We assume that because she is a single mother, she is required in some way to feed, clothe, and generally care for her children. This requirement seems to alter her array of career choices in a more significant way than Jeske’s family values changed hers. Some may even want to say this mother’s choice is so strictly constrained by her children’s dependence on her care that her choice is not voluntary. This claim would have grave consequences for my argument, as I argue that only a voluntary choice can generate special obligation.

In order to reply to this issue, I rely on the two ways Matt Zwolinski views choice as “morally transformative” (Zwolinski 690). According to Zwolinski choices can be (1) autonomy-exercising or (2) preference-evincing (Zwolinski 693). An autonomy-exercising choice is the

kind of choice that reflects an agent's autonomy by reflecting that agent's desires, values, or goals. These kinds of decisions belong to the agent and do not provide grounds for interference. A preference-evincing choice is a choice that simply communicates something about an agent's preferences. A preference-evincing choice often involves choosing from a set of constrained choices. Jeske's choice to be an academic is what we would call an autonomy-exercising choice. The decision to go into academia is a choice that is attributable to her as an autonomous agent despite the fact that she does not exist in a vacuum in which all choices are open to her. But on the other side of the choice spectrum is our single mother.

Our single mother's choice to work three minimum wage jobs is closer to what Zwolinski called a preference-evincing choice. The social and economic circumstances seem to directly impact the mother's choice making more than they did Jeske's, resulting in a severe constraint of choices for the mother. Therefore, instead of the mother's choice to work three jobs as being autonomously exercised, her choice instead "signal[s] information about an agent's preferences. Significantly, this is true even when the choice is made under conditions of less than full autonomy" (Zwolinski 693). According to Zwolinski, this is obviously not morally transformative in the same way as an autonomy-exercising choice, but "surely it does something to change the moral landscape" (Zwolinski 693). Perhaps this means that voluntariness is scalar, but this does not challenge the idea that the choices we make in many circumstances are normatively significant. They can generate special obligations for us, even if we make them in circumstances that hinder robust autonomy.²⁶ If I chose chocolate ice cream from a store that

²⁶ Thank you to Andrew I. Cohen for clarifying this point.

only sells only chocolate and vanilla, I am obligated to pay for it in the same way as in the case where I chose chocolate over twenty other flavors.

It is my claim that in cases of both autonomy-exercising choice and preference-evincing choice, the choice is at least minimally voluntary. I have shown why we should think both kinds of choices can still justify obligations, but I should clarify what I mean by minimally voluntary. What I mean by minimally voluntary is that a choice is made without threat by another individual and would be reflectively recognized by the agent as her own choice. A minimally voluntary action, like a fully voluntary one, can justify certain special obligations (e.g. paying for the ice cream). If someone put a gun to my head, pushed me into an ice cream parlor, and forced me to either pick chocolate ice cream or die, then my choice is no longer voluntary, on an ordinary understanding. I am not obligated to pay for that ice cream in the same way as I would be if I voluntarily *chose* to purchase it. But so long as I am still making a preference-evincing choice, my choice meets the requirements for being minimally voluntary. Again, we may desire not to only make preference-evincing choices in our lives. We might want to exercise our full autonomy whenever we can. I am simply arguing that even in cases of minimal voluntariness, the choice still motivates obligation. Our single mother prefers working three minimum wage jobs to other non-ideal options such as losing custody of her children, taking out (perhaps more) loans, or seeking other kinds of work that are even less desirable but might pay more. And that choice, albeit not fully, if at all, autonomy-exercising, is still (1) minimally voluntary, and (2) obligation-creating in so far as she must actually perform the duties of those three jobs she chose to work.

In this section on voluntarism I have attempted to show that we should accept voluntarism as the correct way of understanding and justifying special obligations, mainly

through the work of Jeske. I have also addressed areas in which Jeske's project and mine differ. But all of this was in service of furthering my argument that voluntarily opting-in to roles is what should ground Robin Zheng's claim that we have special obligations to idealize our roles. However, roles that we do not enter voluntarily, whether through a lack of choices or cases of simply being born to certain parents, or of being assigned societally to be a certain sex or race, do not motivate these special obligations because they were not voluntarily chosen.

4 OPTING-IN

Zheng's RIM answers perhaps the hardest question for any reparative theory: how do we trace responsibility to an individual when the harm was created by a system of interlocking and unjust structures? Her answer is located in the fact that individuals occupy roles, and "because social structures are built up out of interlinked social roles that together constitute a stable system [of injustice]" (Zheng 879).²⁷ However, Zheng's theory is still missing an important component. It seems that only when we opt-into roles voluntarily we might be liable to justifiable sanctioning for failing to uphold the special obligations such roles entail. For example, under Zheng's broad RIM an individual is morally responsible for idealizing her role as an *X* insofar as *X* is a part of the unjust structure. However, on my view, if the agent had no choice in inhabiting role *X*, I am not justified in claiming she has a positive, special obligation to idealize role *X*. My view is not inconsistent with having reasons and the ability to act in a **supererogatory** manner. But without voluntarily choosing and consenting to the burdens of the role, her fellow citizens are not justified in sanctioning her for failing to idealize that specific role.²⁸ In the following section I

²⁷ Zheng's account of the pernicious impacts of unjust structures compares well with Marilyn Frye's notion of oppression as a birdcage. She writes that "[i]t is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere," Frye, pg. 2-7

²⁸ Zheng is unclear as to whether the burden of idealization is satisfied through thoughtful reflection, action, or a combination both. She writes that when one is responsible for structural injustice on the RIM then there exists a

will elaborate on what I mean by an opt-in role, why we might owe something extra in those roles, and why it affects how we answer Zheng's concern about how much an individual is accountable for (Zheng 880).

4.1 The Opt-In Role

On my account, an opt-in role is a role an individual chooses voluntarily by her own accord. Some opt-in roles are chosen and defined through explicit contracts, such as a person's occupation or a couple's marriage contract, while others are opted-into through reflective affirming of commitments, like the role of daughter, sister, etc.²⁹ But what all of these roles have in common, despite their differing origins, is that they were chosen. It is not usually mere moral luck that one ends up a teacher instead of a doctor, or that one marries their specific spouse, or even that one continues a relationship with her parents. And because these roles were chosen, we tend to think choices transform the moral landscape of what others may and may not do in regard to that choice (Zwolinski 694). Even though many of the choices we make as individuals are socially influenced, we still call them choices that imply acts of agency. It is this freedom to *choose* whether to occupy a role that also motivates the difference in how we are obligated to act within it on my view.³⁰

However, not all social roles or group categorization are voluntarily chosen. Instead, people seem to belong to a wide variety of unchosen social groups. This may be a result of moral luck, or the result of the ways in which society categorize people via-a-vis certain identifying

“[D]emand on individuals to add a further reason into this [previously existing set of expectations for the role]: whether and how one can push the boundaries of one's role in the right direction. In short, it means performing all one's roles with a raised consciousness” (880). This seems to suggest that the extra burdens of idealization is achieved through an internal process as opposed to a necessarily action based evaluation.

²⁹ I am not speaking of the biological status of being a daughter or sister but the filial connections that such roles often involve.

³⁰ I make this claim only within the context of Zheng's theory. I do not wish to suggest that all obligations arise out of choices. I simply wish to suggest that under Zheng's theory of distributing burdens, she should account for whether the role was chosen voluntarily.

features. But no matter their origin, people belong to a certain number of significant social groups, categories, and relations without any choice-making on their part. For example, it seems as though a person's race, albeit socially constructed, is not something readily chosen. Recall the case of Rachel Dolezal, a woman publicly scorned for identifying as a black woman despite being assigned as Caucasian with no history of African American ancestry. While she may exemplify a marginal case of someone trying to choose her race, the public's reaction to her suggests a conception of race that is still tied to the unchangeable and unchosen parts of one's identity, such as the way in which a person's skin color and/or lineage marks them as being assigned to a certain social group. This understanding seems to match up with Sally Haslanger's definition of race. She writes that "[a] group is *racialized* iff its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and the group is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features" (Haslanger 44). Being marked as belonging to a certain social group because of some feature is not within a person's control to choose. No matter what choice Dolezal tried to make, she could not change the fact that the race she was "marked" as belonging to was not one of "socially positioned subordina[nce]." In fact, she was poised to acquire certain privileges in virtue of her assigned race and could not, at least under our current understanding of race, successfully choose her race.³¹

Even if Haslanger's definition of race holds, it still remains unclear why race should be categorized as a role. Zheng, once again, offers no argument as to why she believes race can be classified as a social role, yet she frequently groups it in with other roles we can be obligated to idealize. She writes that "[s]ocial roles come in many types... They may be 'specific'... or they

³¹ Haslanger takes a similar view on gender which seems outdated in today's discourse on gender. I find it completely plausible that race could follow suit and become what I would want to call a voluntary role in the future.

may be ‘diffuse,’ in the sense that they govern all contexts, like ‘woman’ or ‘Muslim.’ They may be ‘ascribed’ on the basis of what one is, as in categories defined by race and age” (Zheng 875). If she is correct about the nature of roles, then on her view people can be *held accountable* for being good in their roles as women, Muslims, Caucasian, young person, etc. Despite the fact that it is unclear what it means for someone to be a good woman or a good Muslim as is relate structural injustice, it is even more unclear why our peers could hold us accountable for doing so and sanctioning us when we fail to do so. As I’ve said before, I may have supererogatory reasons for being a good white person (whatever that entails), but it does not follow that I have special obligations in virtue of my race. I may have strong reasons, relating to the privileges I’ve been afforded by my race, to donate to the NAACP. However, these strong reasons are distinct from obligations.³² Yes, we may be motivated to act in certain ways so as to minimize injustice irrespective of our unchosen social roles. Zheng’s framework, however, suggests that our obligations to mitigate injustice are assigned by our certain roles, chosen or not.

A worthwhile alternative to my project is to suggest Zheng simply narrow her conception of roles. But this objection doesn’t get to the heart of what grounds our special obligations. Which is why my project is to illuminate the power of choice in justifying what individuals are obligated to do, not to just object to Zheng’s assumption that race is a role. If the agent had no choice in inhabiting role X, we are not justified in claiming she must--or even should--idealize role X as part of some system of reparation. Unless she voluntarily chose and consented to the “set of expectations -predictive and normative- that apply to [her] in virtue of” the role, her fellow citizens are not justified in assigning her certain burdens (Zheng 873). By expanding on

³² Thank you to S.L. Dwyer for posing multiple important objections to the idea of race as a role and the potential consequences of my view for combatting racism in particular. I’m also indebted to Connor Kianpour for his help in mitigating some of these concerns and providing the NAACP example.

the voluntarist project of justifying extra, or special, burdens, I propose amending Zheng's theory so as to restrict additional burdens over some baseline to those that come from one's voluntary choices.

4.2 The Non-Voluntary Role

Now that I have discussed a voluntarist account of special obligation and opted-in roles, I will attempt to exemplify and further the distinction between these opted-into roles and non-voluntary ones. Consider Zheng's own example. "[A] teacher might be encouraged or mandated by others to diversify a syllabus, whether or not she is blameworthy for not doing so previously. This sanction is clearly an appropriate thing to require of a 'teacher' to improve her performance *qua* teacher" (Zheng 882). The sanctions her fellow citizens can apply to her are bound by the fact that she chose to become a teacher *and* because everyone is accountable for structural injustice through their roles, according to the RIM.³³ Had she, say, chosen to become a surgeon, it would not make sense for us to claim that she *should* make her syllabus more diverse because that is not a part of the role she took on. But what Zheng fails to highlight is that the burden of teacher is one she voluntarily bears. This is what motivates these same claims of what it takes to be a good teacher on my amended RIM. It is not simply the relation the role bears to structural injustice.

But unlike the role of teacher, things get a bit trickier when we think of non-voluntary roles and the strong burdens we may, or as I claim, may not have in regard to them. In virtue of being a white person I occupy a non-voluntary role³⁴ that has been a part of structural injustice. First, let us consider whether being a white person is even a social role on this theory. It seems as

³³ I offer no specific criteria for what opted-in roles count as contributing to structural injustice. It seems fair to assign teachers this burden as their role is one that has historically been affected by implicit bias. And it also seems uncontroversial not to assign this burden to a delivery person.

³⁴ Again, I am simply following Zheng's assertion that race classifies as a role (875).

though there are some norms and expectations (problematic or not) that exist in regard to my race. There is an expectation that I not use the N word, not appropriate certain cultural styles, and plausibly not receive the benefits of certain Affirmative Action programs. I also have role-segments in virtue of my race. Like any teacher having a relationship to their students, fellow faculty, and superintendent; any white person has a relationship to others that is marked by their race. Minimally, I am likely to relate to others through my race as it classifies me as a majority in many social settings in the same way any other white person would (controlling for regional differences).

I might feel a responsibility to push the boundaries of my role as a white person when I can. Or, I might have a strong personal desire to help fix the structure in relation to my being white. But it is difficult to see why anyone else would be able to sanction me for failing to live up to a particular role-ideal in virtue of this non-voluntary role. So long as I am not making injustice worse, which would result in its own justification for sanctions, I seem to have the right to be free from others sanctioning me and saying that I should adhere to a certain idealization of a white person. The reason others are not justified in sanctioning me derives from the fact that I never opted-into the role of being a white person. While this may seem harsh, it is also true that if I want to benefit from society at all, I will belong to some kind of opt-in role.³⁵ Society relies on social cooperation and a certain kind of membership. Minimally, if I do not solely rely on my hunting and gathering abilities and live in the wilderness, I will enter some voluntary role that

³⁵ I leave open the possibility that should someone want to live as an outlaw they are free to do so and be free of all role-ideals and the responsibility that comes with them. They just would not be privy to any of the benefits of a modern social society.

constitutes the structure. And in these opt-in roles to which I *do* belong, I face the burden of dismantling structural injustice, just from a different lens.

Consider an actual example of an unjustified sanction against me because of my non-voluntary role as a white person. I should not be sanctioned for failing to idealize my role as “white person.” If I do not wish to acknowledge the privilege my whiteness has afforded me by not participating in public discourse on race, or donating to NAACP *because* of my role as a white person, others have no right to implement sanctions (such as social distance or outright criticism) on me for failing to live up to my role as a good white person. Even if it is agreeable that a good/ideal white person *would* participate in public discourse on race or donate to the NAACP, I cannot be held accountable for good performance in that non-voluntary role by others. I may wish to be a good “white person” and combat the historically racist structure and thus sanction myself for not living up to my moral and relational commitments, but the line of accountability does not stretch any further.

This may seem like an impossible way to crack away at injustice considering the fact that a person’s race is often directly tied to the privileges and oppressions of racism. But this distinction between opted-in and non-voluntary roles helps justify what might otherwise be too much responsibility. Consider, once again, Zheng’s own example of a teacher.

[I]t is simply part of being a good teacher to ask: ... What trends are shaping higher education today, and what political and economic conditions are affecting my students’ ability to learn? What committees or local organizations should I serve on to address the problems I see? While such reflection is not printed in the formal job description...it goes without saying that a good X must consider such questions” (Zheng 879).

This seems like a large burden to place on a teacher. Requiring a teacher to demonstrate this level of “raised consciousness” (Zheng 880) asks a lot of such an already difficult job. This is a

worthy objection to Zheng's RIM. Zheng does concede that this might be a lot of responsibility for every individual to hold considering the amount of roles they inhabit. But she points to the fact in doing anything well there is a lot of work and effort. Her model simply encourages us to think that the criteria for being a good *X* includes the way in which the role presses up against the unjust structure. I find Zheng's answer to this concern plausible, but in need of my account of opted-in roles in order to withstand the objection.

For Zheng's response to succeed, she must recognize the difference between these opt-in and non-voluntary roles. She claims that the burdens we place on the teacher are justified because "the RIM locates these burdens within a person's roles [and because] they are burdens that she is already committed to shouldering," they are justified (Zheng 881). And when someone becomes a teacher, and accepts the unjust structure that role helps perpetuate through its very existence (Zheng 874), she indeed commits to shouldering the burdens of the RIM. The fact that Zheng values the *commitment* the teacher makes shows she cares about voluntarism, her theory just fails to properly account for it. Unlike the role of teacher, it is hard to see a similar commitment in cases of the non-voluntary roles we inhabit. Being a "good woman" might involve being politically progressive and fighting the patriarchy. But I have not voluntarily committed to anything like that, nor is it necessarily a burden I am responsible for bearing. Therefore, it does not make sense for someone to hold me accountable for being a good woman in the same way they could hold me accountable for being concerned with the socioeconomic statuses of my students as a teacher. The role of "woman," because it is non-voluntary, is normatively inconsequential on the RIM. The normative commitment that Zheng speaks of, as I

have shown, is only apparent in cases of opted-in roles and, as I've argued, her theory must account for this.

5 AN IMPORTANT OBJECTION

My paper as well as Zheng's is predicated on the belief that structural injustice is bad and should be dismantled, which means I must deal with a substantial objection to my proposal. An objector might ask: what might the dismantling of structural injustice look like if we do not include the roles I have called non-voluntary in the rectification project? This might mean little progress in dismantling racism, sexism, and homophobia. If no one can justifiably sanction me for not pushing the boundaries of being a white person, how will the structure ever change from being racist? Is a woman a bad woman if she does not push back against misogyny? In this section I address these concerns while drawing on my distinction between opted-in and non-voluntary roles. That distinction still permits social and structural progress, even from those inhabiting non-voluntary roles.

Restricting special obligations to opted-into roles in no way impedes progress in the areas of race, gender, and sexuality. Instead, it means we get to hold those people who have opted-into particular roles even more accountable for the injustices associated with those roles. Consider a role that would drastically change under my amended RIM: a police officer. Not only has the role of police officer been used to preserve an unjust system of violence against black people, but individuals in this role have also opted-in to it. When someone becomes a police officer, they are afforded privileges and responsibilities. We do not make claims on our neighbors to protect us in that same way we do police officers. Why? Because police officers have opted-into a job that

burdens them with that responsibility.³⁶ And now, under my amended RIM that job also burdens them with the responsibility to act with the “raised consciousness” it now takes to be a good police officer because they voluntarily opted-into that role.

A police officer on this model would now be tasked with questions like: Am I justified in pulling this man over for failing to signal? Why do I think these kids are causing trouble? Why am I suspicious of what this person is saying to me when I have no reason to suspect them of lying? If the RIM claims that in order to be a good police officer one must ask these kinds of questions, that claim on them is much more justified considering the fact that they opted-into the role. I am aware that police officers may object to such requirements as interfering with the serious job they are tasked. They need to think quickly and do not have time to ask these questions in life and death situations. I propose two, although brief, answers to this concern. First, it seems as though if police officers are responsible for making fast life and death decisions, they should already be asking these questions. This leads to my second reply that of course there is a time and place for these questions. It is up to those who wish to be good police officers to determine the best ways to see these questions out.

The same situation can play out for whatever specific injustice one thinks the most pressing. The point is simply that while I might want to be a good *X* when *X* is a role I involuntarily fall into, I do not have a special obligation to be a good *X*. The further point is that without that claim our theory loses very little. Most of the structural change we wish to see is going to happen in the opted-in roles. Sexism, racism, and many others can be dismantled by the raised consciousness of good teachers, writers, scientists, politicians, etc., because we get to hold

³⁶ This appears not to be a legal duty though. A ruling in *Warren v. District of Columbia*, a court of appeals ruled that "the duty to provide public services is owed to the public at large, and, absent a special relationship between the police and an individual, no specific legal duty exists" (“*Warren v. District of Columbia*”). .

them accountable. We are justified in asking them to be good because they opted-into the role and therefore consented to our greater claims.

6 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I offered an amendment to Robin Zheng's Role-Ideal Model (RIM) in order to further justify the higher claims we wish to make on persons inhabiting certain roles. Zheng's initial proposal suggests that in order to dismantle structural injustice, we must further the boundaries of certain roles. Her example of a teacher being responsible for questioning the socioeconomic status of her students seem like a tall order without closer inspection. I have drawn an important distinction between opted-in roles and what I call non-voluntary roles. This distinction provides a basis for understanding why only the roles we voluntarily enter are the only ones for which others have the rights to hold us accountable.

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