

Mara Marin

Connected by Commitment: Oppression and Our Responsibility to Undermine It
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Reviewed by Ann E. Cudd, 2018

Ann E. Cudd is the provost and a philosophy professor at the University of Pittsburgh. She is the author of *Analyzing Oppression* (Oxford, 2006) and the co-author, with Nancy Holmstrom, of *Capitalism, For and Against: A Feminist Debate* (Cambridge, 2011). She is interested in questions of economic and educational inequality from both practical and philosophical perspectives, as well as conceptions of freedom and autonomy that take seriously our inherent social connectedness.

In her insightful and highly original book, Mara Marin offers a new way of explaining how social relations generate obligations to act in ways that undermine oppression. She offers what she calls a commitment model, for which the paradigm example is friendship and extends by analogy to public and collective social relations. According to this model, "commitments are relationships that develop over time through the accumulated effect of open-ended actions and responses." By creating patterns that generate expectations and eventually norms, "agents incur obligations via their voluntary actions . . . without knowing the precise content of their obligations" (25). Prime among the obligations is not to take advantage of the others in the relationship, especially via oppressive relations, but rather to change the relations so that they are not oppressive. Through this model Marin argues that social transformation is possible (and obligatory) for individuals to initiate because it begins with individual actions and responses.

According to Marin's model, commitments involve five characteristic features. First, commitments are made deliberately by agents, not given. Second, commitments arise as the result of a subject's open-ended responses to actions of others. Third, they must be endorsed by the subject. Fourth, commitments are governed by norms or expectations. And fifth, they generate open-ended obligations (32). Friendship is the paradigmatic personal form of commitment. Friendship grows out of intentional interactions between persons, which over time generate expectations to act in ways that are structured by norms of friendship. As the friends continue to act in expected ways, they become vulnerable to each other in case the other fails to respond in a normatively friendly way, or in case one person repeatedly allows the other to give more without reciprocating appropriately.

Because they are endorsed by the individuals within the relationship, commitments involve obligations that arise out of the relationships among the parties. One is obligated to respond in ways that are appropriate to the form of the relationship. The appropriateness of response that fulfills obligation is a publicly determined matter, about which individuals can disagree. For example, one friend can respond to an invitation to dinner by bringing wine and sending a follow up thank you note, but not by offering to pay for the meal, nor by coming empty-handed repeatedly while never reciprocating the invitation. But friends could disagree about how

frequently they have to invite the other to dinner because there are multiple ways of responding appropriately.

By analogy with friendships, Marin posits that "social relations should also be understood as commitments and . . . our obligations to transform oppressive social relations have a structure similar to that of the obligations of commitment" (45). The notion of commitment thus offers both a socio-structural and agentic point of view: how one makes and lives up to commitments depends on social norms that attach to social positions (for example, what it is to be a friend, a parent, a citizen), but they are built out of the accumulated actions of individual agents.

One great feature of this model is that commitments contain the potential to transform norms that structure them and explain how individuals can bring about structural transformation. "Because norms have to be maintained and depend for their maintenance on individual, accumulated action, norms can also be disrupted, modified, or decentered by such action" (40). However, there is a collective action problem that needs to be solved if individual actions are to have the effect of changing social relations. Marin responds to this worry by suggesting that counter-normative action always changes something. She writes, "when we act contrary to norms that govern positions in the social structure, we change something about the options open to and constraints operating on other people" (63). However, it is not clear that we do anything when we act alone. For example, refusing to buy sweatshop goods is not going to affect anything unless we manage to start a movement, and that requires other people to go along with us.

The model of commitment for social relations shows how obligations to resist oppressive relations are generated. The obligation comes from the negative duty not to contribute to oppression. In other words, it comes when and from the fact that my actions, even if I do not intend to make others worse off, contribute to the situation of the oppressed. This is a claim that I have also argued for (Cudd, 2006), though Marin's model of commitment helps to explain the mechanism by which individual actions create harmful social norms.

One concern about Marin's presentation of her account is that she seems not to recognize that the model of commitment itself cannot tell us when a norm ought to be disrupted or modified. For this, additional moral premises and theory are needed. It is not clear that Marin sees this point, and perhaps leans too hard on the model for prescriptions in later chapters when she applies the model to specific social relations.

Marin offers two methods of determining when we are obliged to resist certain social relations. First, she argues that commitment demands that social relations require reform when one party to the relationship demands it: "when a social practice requires reform, when a participant in the practice asks for reform, the others have obligations to respond" (51). But this generates too many and too few demands for reform. There will inevitably be those who complain even when they ought not to, and those who fail to complain when they should. Oppressed persons, for instance, often adapt their preferences to their treatment and fail to demand what they want or need and are legitimately entitled to as worthy of equal concern and respect. Determining when a social practice rightly requires reform, then, requires the moral premise and a theory of equality.

Second, she claims that oppressive relations are like bad friendships, where one party is benefiting disproportionately as compared to the other. Our obligation is to make an appropriate response, not to perform any particular action. Again, we need a theory of equality or fairness as well as a causal theory of the social relations at issue to bolster the model of commitment in order to determine when to resist and how social relations should change.

Marin applies her commitment model to three kinds of social relations in three very substantive chapters. Chapter 3 applies the model to law and political obligation. She argues against two common ideas about the justification of laws and our obligation to obey, offering her commitment model as a replacement. First, she argues that it is a mistake to think of law as removing the vulnerability of the state of nature because once we adopt laws and a government that enforces them, we are vulnerable to the social relations that they create that may be unequal or oppressive. It is a mistake to think of laws and their enforcement as separate from the law because "enforcement determines the precise demands of a law, and thus its actual content" (83). This point seems to me to elide an important and useful distinction between just and unjust enforcement of law. After all, it is not the law against speeding that is the problem, but the unequal enforcement of the law on Black drivers that is unjust. Reading charitably, Marin wants to say that there is one larger problem at root with either unjust laws or the unjust enforcement of law, which can be explained through the model of political obligation as commitment. Injustice in the law is a failure by individuals to respond appropriately to their commitment to equality under the law.

Instead of asking whether to obey the law, Marin bids us ask the open-ended question: how ought we act? On the commitment model of political obligation, we have an obligation not to act in ways that further entrench oppression. In some cases, this means we must act contrary to law, both not to harm others and to create potentially new social relations that are not oppressive. "The reason is that in acting contrary to the law, I can unmake (some) of the injustice of oppression. This justification connects the dissenting action to the possibility of social transformation" (88). One's actions are to be viewed as invitations to others to responsively act to create a chain of actions and responses to them that will transform our relations into more egalitarian ones. In this way Marin offers a gradualist approach to social transformation.

Chapter 4 takes up oppressive caregiving relations and argues for modeling legal marriage as commitment. The commitment model fits when ongoing relations generate expectations and vulnerability. Since all of us need care at some points, and nearly all can give care, caregiving is a pervasive social relation. Our need for care generates vulnerability to one another, but the more important vulnerability is that of the caregiver's vulnerability to low status and relative poverty. Current social arrangements create social groups of caregivers and care-receivers that are related hierarchically in oppressive relationships. Although Marin recognizes that caregiving is highly gendered, she focuses on other aspects of our social understanding of care that result in oppression of caregivers. Caregiving requires skills of flexibility, which are also necessarily quite general. They are rendered invisible by what Marin calls the "specialization paradigm," which values labor that is specialized over that which is general. General skills of caregiving are not easily recognized as skills, and so are judged as inferior forms of labor. Also, the separation between intimate and professional caregiving creates the hierarchy that places caregiving below other forms of labor, in that it entrenches the specialization paradigm. Professional caregiving is

specialized, not general. Yet generalized care is necessary for intimate caregiving, the form that develops in personal and especially marital relationships.

Intimate caregiving takes time, which makes it harder for caregivers to develop the specialized skills that bring status and market rewards. This makes one vulnerable to oppression. Marin insightfully analyzes the way that vulnerability to oppression through caregiving among otherwise equal adults gets going through the development of expectations structured by social norms. One person's giving of care to another can become an expectation and a pattern that no one asked for but that leaves the caregiver vulnerable in case of a break-up. Yet Marin argues that if the social institutions are attuned to this and work to eliminate vulnerability, oppression can be avoided. Thus, marriage reform should seek to eliminate vulnerability, not to eliminate caregiving relations from legal marriage protections.

Marin argues that the recent marriage-reform proposals of Elizabeth Brake and Martha Fineman would entrench this form of injustice. Fineman's proposal to eliminate marriage contracts and her focus on just distribution of care of children would not solve the problem of the unequal and unjust production of care. Brake's minimal marriage proposal, which allows persons to unbundle traditional marriage rights and assign them separately as they choose, will also not solve the problem, and simply avoids addressing it. Brake explicitly disallows claims for compensation for caregiving unless specifically contracted for. Marin locates a problem in the disaggregating of the bundle of rights with marriage, because it "ignores the flexibility of caregiving and thus denies the labor involved in exercising skills of flexibility" (109).

Unlike Brake's gender-centered, feminist analysis of the problems with legal marriage that offers a solution that she believes will de-gender marriage, Marin's solution is not aimed at gender equality. "What would neutralize that risk (of becoming dependent as a consequence of caregiving) is not equality between men and women but a transformation of the structures of meaning governing caregiving, its value, and of the institutional separations between care work and other kinds of work" (113). Marriage as commitment solves these problems by recognizing the open-endedness of relationships and the way in which caregiving makes one vulnerable to one's partner. The proposal is to make just responses to the vulnerability caused by asymmetrical caregiving a matter of the marital contract and equalizing responses required by marital law.

It is problematic to separate caregiving from gender or race if one wants to understand the structure of oppression, however. Although individual caregivers who are white males are vulnerable to losses if they are primarily intimate caregivers for long periods of time, this is more a one-off kind of problem. One is much more likely to become enmeshed in long-term caregiving roles as a woman or person of color and will find it harder to re-enter professional or paid work because of one's gender or race. In short, I don't see caregivers as an oppressed social group, but rather see asymmetrical caregiving as a typical feature of the exploitation of women and people of color.

Chapter 5 applies the commitment model to work and labor relations. Marin argues that we are vulnerable to one another through social relations of work, but that this vulnerability is rendered invisible by the ideas of personal achievement and rights as boundaries, along with the processes

of capitalism that create hierarchies of high- and low-skilled labor. The notion of commitment, she argues, provides a vision to create solidarity across different types of labor.

Work is amenable to the commitment model because it makes us mutually dependent as well as mutually enabling. Marin's account of work focuses on several aspects of social relations of production. First, the division of labor and consequent specialization means that labor, to be productive, depends on many other laborers extending throughout the economy. And the fact that each worker can be productive only through the cooperation of others creates relations of vulnerability among workers. Second, the material dimension of work, that is, the necessity of producing and reproducing the material conditions of human life, are in part socially determined, and are dependent for success of the work of many others. Third, all human work is skilled and so must be learned from others.

Marin argues that contemporary capitalism obscures the vulnerability of work by making the relations of production and consumption invisible. Further, the individualist conception of merit obscures the mutual dependence of work and permits inequality. She offers the example of doctors and nurses to show how capitalism goes wrong in how we evaluate and reward work. Both are necessary for the care of patients, yet doctors receive higher status and pay. Marin admits that doctors' starting salaries should be higher to account for the longer period of training but claims that the salaries should not be different after twenty years of experience and should not accrue different levels of social esteem. I find this a dubious claim, as it denies that there are different marginal contributions to the care provided by the two kinds of labor, and that one form is scarcer than the other.

Marin argues that we should replace the capitalist idea of rewarding personal achievement with the notion of workers related through commitment, an open-ended chain of actions and responses that creates expectations and obligations to respond in ways that create equal relations among us. Although I think this is a good way of thinking about our connections with one another for some purposes, I don't see how we could successfully run an economy using this principle for determining wages. In the end, this chapter relies on a dubious economic theory but offers a social analysis of work that seems nonetheless valuable for recognizing our interdependence. In sum, the commitment model is a valuable contribution to normative theory, though it requires a good causal account of the particular social relations at issue for apt application.

Reference

Cudd, Ann E. 2006. *Analyzing oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press.