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Appropriate Slurs

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It is natural to think that derogating people with slurs is wrong *in principle*. On the face of it, the notion that no one should be subjected to derogation because of their group membership seems plausible. At least, this assumption appears safe when the target group is a racial or ethnic minority. But what about cases in which the speaker using a slur is a member of an oppressed minority group, and the slur in question targets a powerful majority group? Plausibly, members of an indigenous group in the USA who derogate white Americans with slurs need not be doing anything morally objectionable. Slurs may also be vehicles for protesting groups like the Ku Klux Klan, or Greece's Golden Dawn (a nationalistic, anti-immigrant political group). Slurring in these cases may be morally valuable in ways that slurring historically oppressed groups is not—or so—I shall argue.

Recent literature on slurs is devoted to accounting for why slurs tend to provoke offense in listeners (see Saka 2007; Jeshion 2013; Camp 2013; Anderson and Lepore 2013a; and Bolinger 2015, among others). Theorists have had much less to say about ethical questions surrounding the use of slurs, and they tend not to allow for permissible group derogation. Hornsby (2001) claims that slurs are "useless" for non-bigots such as ourselves, insisting that "there is nothing that we want to say with them" (129). Anderson and Lepore (2013b) claim that groups have a right to determine how they are referred to, and so if the use of a slur for a group violates this right, its use is morally impermissible:

> It is widely noted that…groups have a right for their culture to be respected, and perhaps, supported. Names are often important aspects of a group's culture, and so, it is reasonable to include the manner in which a group is referenced as a part of its right to self-determination generally. If this is correct, it is a short step from a right to determine whether the use of a name is permissible to one to determine whether its use is impermissible (Anderson and Lepore 2013b, 351).

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It is implausible that *all* groups have a right to be respected. Presumably, groups whose self-understanding is partially constituted by a commitment to white supremacy (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazis) do not have a right for their culture to be respected (Barry 2001, p. 258; Killmister 2012, p. 263). In some cases, considerations about the importance of preserving a group's culture and identity may actually provide a basis for slurring other groups. People who are deaf, e.g., may derogate people whose hearing abilities are typical and thereby establish and reinforce a group identity. Whether the group consisting of people who can hear constitutes a distinctive culture (in Anderson and Lepore's sense), they do not obviously have the right to unilaterally determine how deaf people refer to them. Thus, the sorts of considerations that Anderson and Lepore give in favor of deciding whether the use of a name for a group is morally impermissible do not settle important questions about the ethics of using slurs.

In some cases, prohibitions on slurs seem appropriate and justified. We can imagine someone arguing that it is permissible to dehumanize Middle Eastern soldiers with racial slurs on the grounds that one is fighting in a just war against them, and slurring the enemy makes defeating them easier. Yet this view is misguided, since slurs that target Middle Easterners are likely to promulgate objectionable attitudes and undermine the social standing and self-respect of innocent people both during the conflict and after it has concluded. However, as we will see, the use of slurs need not give rise to wrongs of this sort. The aim of this paper is to show that derogation with slurs can constitute a morally valuable activity, and thus derogatory uses of slurs are sometimes morally permissible. I will focus on two sets of cases. In the first, slurs function as vehicles for protesting groups that manifest bad-making features (such as white supremacist groups). In slurring these groups as a form of protest, victims can maintain their self-respect. Additionally, third-party observers may use protest slurs as a way of distancing themselves from the target group and thereby reaffirming their integrity, and as a way of fostering solidarity with victims. In the second set of cases, vulnerable minority groups use slurs for a powerful majority to distance themselves from the majority and thereby cultivate a unique group identity.

I will not provide an exhaustive account that purports to determine for each slur whether its use is permissible. I will not motivate cases of "linguistic reclamation," in which the targets of a slur use the term in a non-derogatory way, a paradigm case of which is LGBT speakers' adoption of "queer" as a label for themselves (Brontsema 2004; see also Saka 2007, Hom 2008, Jeshion 2013, and Bianchi 2014, among others), nor will I address uses of slurs that would normally be impermissible yet may be acceptable in the context of satire, a comedy routine, or a work of fiction designed to lampoon or criticize attitudes promulgated by paradigmatic derogatory uses of these terms (cf. Richard 2008, 12; Bolinger 2015). Rather, I will motivate the claim that the practice of *derogating* certain groups with slurs plays a positive role in users' moral lives in a range of cases.

1 Slurs and the Varieties of Social Groups

Roughly, slurs are words or signs whose conventional role is to derogate people on the basis of their membership in a certain class or group, which may be delineated by ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, gender, occupation, or other

features.[1] Some theorists distinguish slurs from pejoratives that target people on the basis of personal traits or behavior (Saka 2007, 148; see also Hay 2013 and Nunberg forthcoming).[2] However, religion-based slurs (e.g., "Yid" and "Bible thumper") are "applied not just on the basis of a kind of abstract group membership, but for practicing…a certain religion," and this is not clearly separable from one's behavior (Jeshion 2013, 236). Additionally, derogatory terms for sexual orientation, like "faggot," do not clearly fall on either side of the group-based/behavior-based dichotomy, yet theorists take terms such as these to be a slur (Ashwell 2016; Jeshion 2013). If Card (1995) is correct, a person's sexual orientation is neither an essential, immutable feature nor is it something they freely choose. Finally, slurs may combine essentialist and non-essentialist group classification; "wetback," e.g., combines both race and immigrant status. Thus, it seems we cannot draw a sharp distinction between slurs and behavior-based pejoratives.

Some theorists may want to reserve the label "slur" for words that unjustly target groups (see, e.g., Nunberg forthcoming). Of course, if we define slurs in this way, it is trivially true that derogation with slurs is morally impermissible. I am understanding "slur" broadly so that it refers to terms that target people on the basis of group membership. On this understanding, it is an open question whether slurring is always wrong. In any event, the question of how one wishes to employ the label slur is a mere verbal issue. I am interested in the more substantive philosophical question of whether group derogation is ever a morally valuable activity. While theorists acknowledge the value of reclamation, previous philosophical work has not addressed this question.[3] If slurring has a positive role to play in users' moral lives in a range of cases and does not incur the sorts of wrongs that are standardly attributed to the use of group-derogating terms, then we have reason to believe that slurring is morally permissible in some cases, contra Anderson and Lepore.

Some groups manifest what I shall call "bad-making features." Plausibly, using slurs to protest groups for their bad-making features is a morally valuable activity (however, as I argue below, derogation of a number of groups that do not manifest bad-making features is also a morally valuable activity). The class of features that are bad-making is large and diverse, and I will not provide necessary and sufficient conditions for a feature's being bad-making here. Such features may include commitment to the pursuit of socially destructive joint goals, plans or actions, or commitment to an objectionable ideology. Two paradigm examples of groups with both are the Ku Klux Klan (hereafter, the KKK) and the Golden Dawn, a Greek political party that has embraced a form of nationalism reminiscent of the Nazi ideology (Ellinas 2013, 549). Following Ritchie

[1] I have adapted this rough definition of "slur" from Jeshion (2013, 232). Hom (2010, 165), Anderson and Lepore (2013a, 25), and Bianchi (2014, 12) provide a similar gloss. Anderson and Lepore (2013b) distinguish *acts of slurring* from *slurring words*. The former, which may include offensive jokes, need not constitutively involve the use of conventional slurring words, such as "dago" and "kike." I will restrict my discussion here to conventional slurs and bracket questions about other slurring acts.

[2] One alleged difference is that slurs have neutral counterparts, whereas particularistic pejoratives do not (see, e.g., Hay 2013, 456). A neutral counterpart of a slur *s* is a non-evaluative term that refers to *s*' target group, e.g., "Italian" is a neutral counterpart to "wop" (Hornsby 2001). However, Ashwell (2016) argues that having a possible neutral counterpart is not a necessary condition on a word's being a slur.

[3] Camp (2013, 338) and Jeshion (2013, 237) allow that derogatory attitudes toward certain groups may be warranted (in the sense of fitting), yet neither argues that derogation with slurs is morally permissible nor do they purport to give an account of what is morally valuable about group derogation.

(2015), membership in organized groups such as the KKK requires, inter alia, an intention to cooperate in shared plans and actions with other members. By virtue of joining the KKK, members are committed to the pursuit of the group's harmful goals, including terrorizing racial and ethnic minority groups and LGBT people (among other vulnerable groups), as well as a pernicious ideology that includes white supremacy.

Suppose we create a slur for KKK members; say we denigrate them by calling them "kukkers." Slurring this group is a way of protesting their goals and ideals. The KKK's intended victims may use our imagined slur to declare that the way this group proposes to treat them is unjust and thereby maintain their self-respect (cf. Boxill 1976). Protesting a group with a slur may also be a morally valuable activity for people who are not among the group's intended victims. In general, protesting a group is a way of distancing or dissociating oneself from them (Hill 1979). Third-party observers who are not victims of a white supremacist group may slur them as a way of distancing themselves from the group.[4] For third-party protesters who think that white supremacy has no place in their society, slurring this group is a way of living up to their moral commitments, and thereby maintaining their integrity.[5] Additionally, victim-centered moral considerations can motivate the use of slurs by those not targeted by racist hate groups. Protesting a white supremacist or anti-immigrant group may be an act of solidarity with vulnerable people targeted by such groups (cf. Harvey 1999, 72). Insofar as slurs are vehicles for protest, they have an advantage over thick terms such as "racist" and "bigot," which are generic criticisms of an individual's problematic attitudes or behavior that do not target people on the basis of their membership in an organized hate group like the KKK or Golden Dawn. Further, as Blum (2002) observes, generic thick terms like racist have been so widely overused (e.g., in situations where people manifest varying degrees of racial insensitivity or implicit racial biases of different sorts) that they have lost much of their power as vehicles for condemnation.

We need not assume that protest's value depends on educating one's target about their bad-making features or compelling them to change. On some views, maintaining one's self-respect is a valuable activity even when one knows that doing so will not motivate a change in those who threaten one's self-respect.[6] Likewise, maintaining one's integrity and protesting in solidarity with victims are plausibly valuable independently of whether doing so persuades the target of one's protest to change or leads to other good consequences (Harvey 1999).

Derogation of a group may be impermissible when its members have been coerced into joining. Suppose that a strip mining operation has begun to contaminate a local town's water supply. The miners, who were innocently unaware of the environmental effects of strip mining, learn about these destructive effects, and on the basis of their

[4] Camp (2013, 338) claims that slurs function to distance speakers from targets.

[5] Bell (2013) argues that responding to people who manifest certain vices with contempt is a good way to protest their failure to meet standards one cares about and to thereby maintain one's own integrity. My argument here does not depend on the success of Bell's. If she is right, contempt is one form of protest, yet protest need not be contemptuous (see, e.g., Hill 1979). While some theorists hold that slurs are conventional vehicles for expressing contempt (see, e.g., Richard 2008), a number of theorists deny this (see, e.g., Anderson and Lepore 2013a and Camp 2013). In any event, my aim here is not to motivate having a certain reactive attitude such as contempt but rather to defend the practice of slurring certain groups.

[6] Bernard Boxill suggests that to protest the violation of one's rights is not necessarily to argue that one has the rights in question, and that often "people protest when the time for argument and persuasion is past" (Boxill 1976, 63).

discovery, decide to end the operation. However, their supervisor has hired armed guards to force them to continue. Ordinarily, participation in an environmentally destructive enterprise is a bad-making feature of a group, yet using a slur for the miners in the present case (if there were such a term) to derogate them *qua* participants in a strip mining operation may be impermissible because they have been coerced. Seemingly, under these circumstances, we ought to respond with sympathy, rather than using a slur to protest the group.

The activity of protesting a group by slurring them can play a positive role in our moral lives even when the target group is not as thoroughly evil as the KKK. Suppose we were to coin a slur for a group consisting of people working in the Hollywood entertainment industry including inter alia, studio executives, directors, producers, and actors whose work perpetuates an industry in which the status quo is the production of films that are likely to be financially successful yet are uninspired and lack diversity. This includes not just people in the film industry who directly or indirectly contribute to the production of problematic movies but also bystanders in the industry who have not made a good faith effort to increase diversity and those who have failed to condemn the objectionable practices of other filmmakers. Suppose we introduce the phrase "Hollywood hacks" as a slur for this group. This phrase is a slur because it targets a class of people on the basis of the industry in which they work. In this case, the target group is an instance of what Ritchie (2015) calls an "unorganized group." Membership in groups of this sort does not require an intention to pursue joint plans and perform joint actions with the rest of the group's members. Although filmmaking requires an intention to collaborate with others, and proper subsets of the target group corresponding to Hollywood hacks do join organizations, such as entertainment industry unions, this group is unorganized because it is not the case that an individual's membership is constituted by an intention to pursue common goals and joint actions with all of the group's members. By derogating the target group as Hollywood hacks, speakers protest the lack of innovation, creativity, and diversity in Hollywood films. Those who have a moral objection to the lack of diversity in Hollywood can use this protest slur to maintain their integrity. Additionally, a speaker could use this slur in an act of solidarity with marginalized artists. In making manifest their view that the treatment of these artists is unacceptable, observers can develop a valuable relationship with the artists (cf. Harvey 1999, 71).

The practice of protesting organized and unorganized groups raises a number of philosophical issues concerning collective responsibility. Seemingly, organized groups can be responsible for what they do (Smiley 2010). But what about unorganized groups? A number of theorists allow that groups without a decision-making procedure may be collectively responsible for what they do.[7] In the cases discussed so far, slurring is valuable because of its role in maintaining an agent's self-respect (if she is a victim of the group being slurred) and in maintaining an agent's integrity as well as cultivating solidarity with victims (if she is not a victim of the group being slurred). In general, we have no reason to think that the value of protesting a group through the use of slurs

[7] Smiley (2010) attributes to Tuomela (1989) the view that crowds and mobs may be collectively responsible for harm and destruction, despite the fact that members may not intend to perform group actions, as long as some of the members directly contribute to harm and others either facilitate these contributions or fail to prevent them.

requires specifying an ostensible target. Speakers can protest the group consisting of Hollywood insiders by derogating them as Hollywood hacks without knowing how responsibility for the lack of diversity in Hollywood is distributed over various studio executives, producers, and so on. It would of course be desirable to specify a discrete set of responsible individuals and hold them accountable, but that may be difficult or impossible in the present case.

To this point, we have considered examples designed to illuminate the moral value of slurring groups that manifest bad-making features. While it may seem obvious that the activity of protesting and condemning these groups has a positive role to play in our moral lives, it is natural to suppose that we should never derogate people on the basis of features that are not "bad-making." However, a number of theorists observe that derogation with slurs may function to construct a group identity (see, e.g., Carnaghi et al. 2011; Nunberg forthcoming), and as I will argue, the moral value of cultivating a group identity through derogation with slurs does not depend on the target group's manifesting bad-making features. In cases where derogation is valuable in virtue of its role in constructing a group identity, the target group is often not problematic *qua* group, and the slurs in question need not function as vehicles for protesting their targets. To see what is valuable about derogation of this sort, we will need to examine the ways in which a group may construct an identity by means of slurring another.

2 Relational Goods, Group Identities, and the Significance of Vulnerability

In discussing the moral significance of group membership, Killmister (2012) asks readers to imagine "a minority group whose self-understanding was tied to a belief in the inferiority of white males…and whose shared practices involved…eulogizing about their inadequacies" (265). According to Killmister, since "white males have consistent social reinforcement of their privileged position in society," a marginalized group proclaiming them to be inferior is unlikely to negatively affect the group's social standing or undermine members' self-respect (2012, 265). Although Killmister does not mention slurs specifically, her suggestion provides a basis for a defense of using racial slurs (as well as other slurs that target people on the basis of membership in groups that do not exhibit bad-making features *qua* groups). However, successfully defending the use of slurs on the basis of Killmister's suggestion requires explaining what is morally valuable about slurring the sorts of groups she describes. If this approach is to succeed, the value of using these slurs must not be undermined by whatever wrongs (if any) speakers may incur in derogating targets.

We can imagine members of an indigenous sovereign nation within the USA derogating white Americans with slurs that target them on the basis of their nationality and race. The fact that the indigenous group is vulnerable and attempting to avoid assimilation is morally relevant. By using slurs for the majority and thereby distancing themselves from the target group, indigenous group members construct a self-conception as members of a distinct autonomous group that has a unique culture. Derogation of the target with a slur is a powerful way of saying, in effect, "We're still here!" Given that preventing assimilation and maintaining a distinct group identity are morally worthwhile, we have reason to think that derogation of the majority is a morally valuable activity (I discuss the moral significance of group identities in

greater detail in Section 3). We can even imagine a situation in which an indigenous language is dying, and one of the few remaining words is a slur for white people. To preserve the language and prevent it from becoming a mere historical curiosity, speakers may need to use the slur. Further, the use of a slur for the majority may be instrumentally valuable by fostering camaraderie among members of the indigenous nation,[8] though its value as a vehicle for constructing a group identity need not depend on its use having this effect.

This is not to suggest that a group's vulnerability is, by itself, sufficient for making its members' use of a slur for a non-vulnerable group morally permissible. Plausibly, vulnerable minorities should not use slurs to establish a group identity based solely on differences with the majority, i.e., identifying themselves simply as "the other," which is the sort of approach to cultivating an identity that Simone de Beauvoir (1984) cautions against. One example of a potentially problematic slur is "breeder," which in some LGBT communities is customarily used to slur heterosexuals (Queen 2007, 319). The use of this term could be connected to cultivating a group identity. If the use of breeder cultivates a self-conception on which speakers define themselves simply in terms of how they are presumed to differ from heterosexuals, then it may foster an unhealthy identity. One alleged difference that the slur hints at is that only heterosexual couples reproduce. Since the slur derogates heterosexuals for having children, perhaps its use constructs an identity on which LGBT speakers view themselves as people who do not (or should not) reproduce, and this may create a perverse disincentive for LGBT couples to have children.[9] In that case, derogation with this slur may be impermissible.

In general, group identities will need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. In many Deaf[10] communities in which members use American sign language (ASL), a conventional slur exists for those whose hearing abilities are typical. Deaf signers derogate hearing people with a pejorative version of a classifying sign called "ORAL," which includes an iconic representation of "an exaggerated, large set of lips flapping" (Grushkin 2003, 125; see also Padden and Markowicz 1997, 424). This sign is a slur because its conventional role in Deaf communities is to derogate a class of people, namely hearing individuals who communicate with a spoken language, on the basis of their membership in that class. The ORAL slur appears to be a vehicle for constructing and reinforcing a group identity. As with the case of indigenous groups slurring white Americans, there need not be anything objectionable about identity construction in this case. In slurring hearing people, signers draw boundaries around their own tight-knit community and distance their community from the hearing world. The use of the slur appears to do this, in part, by highlighting one feature of Deaf culture that makes it special and valuable, namely the unique means of communication its members use. While a single, uniform Deaf identity that is stable across communities may not exist, a

[8] Relatedly, Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (1998) report that ridiculing members of an out-group serves to foster solidarity among the sexes. Saka (2007, 145) notes that appropriated uses of slurs can foster camaraderie among in-group members.

[9] We can also imagine antinatalists using "breeder" as a slur for anyone who reproduces, rather than heterosexuals specifically.

[10] Here I am following the convention, suggested by Padden and Humphries (1990), of using "Deaf" to refer to a cultural group consisting of people who use a sign language and feel a shared sense of solidarity, and using "deaf" to refer to individuals who have the audiological condition of being unable to hear yet do not necessarily consider themselves members of a Deaf community.

Deaf identity will often include (inter alia) a self-conception as a member of a small, cohesive group that uses a unique shared language, and whose members enjoy valuable shared experiences because of their shared features (Blume 2010). This may also include a somewhat disparaging attitude toward the hearing community generally (Glickman 1996, 124). We can imagine signers using ORAL to promote a pro-Deaf identity; it is as though Deaf people who use this sign are communicating something to the effect that their language and culture are in some ways superior to the dominant hearing culture. An identity of this sort is not clearly objectionable.

Notice that ORAL need not be a vehicle for protesting hearing people in the way that our imagined slur for the KKK is. By adopting the practice of derogating hearing people, and thereby distancing themselves from the hearing community, Deaf people make it the case that they are not simply people in a hearing community who cannot hear but are instead people who constitute a separate cultural minority group and take pride in their membership in that group.

Evidence suggests that the use of the ORAL slur has not led to the wholesale exclusion of hearing people from Deaf communities. ASL also contains a laudative sign, "HEARING-BUT," which is conventionally applied to family members of deaf people, interpreters who serve as mediators between deaf and hearing people, and others who are welcomed into the Deaf community because they exhibit respect for Deaf culture (Holcomb 2013, 48). In addition to the moral value of maintaining a Deaf identity, use of the ORAL slur may have instrumental value for its targets. For hearing people who are ignorant of Deaf culture, being the target of this slur could help them appreciate their insensitivity, and this may lead to a positive change, though the value of constructing a group identity need not depend on the slur's use having this effect.

Defending derogatory uses of slurs as vehicles for cultivating and reinforcing a group identity requires motivating a distinction between privileged, vulnerable, and non-vulnerable groups. Groups have privilege relative to other groups. Heterosexual white men are a paradigm example of a privileged group, since they are privileged relative to most (if not all) other groups.[11] Vulnerable groups are those whose status as proper objects of society's protection and concern is threatened or undermined by widespread prejudice (Waldron 2012, 5). Seemingly, the group consisting of people who can hear are not vulnerable (*qua* people who can hear). Jay (2009, 97) reports that vulnerable people are often the targets of the most harmful kinds of hate speech. For Waldron (2012), hate speech, which may constitutively involve the use of slurs, harms vulnerable minority groups by creating a social environment that undermines members' implicit assurance that they can go about their daily business and freely participate in society in ways others can without being subjected to harmful discrimination.

Empirical data indicate that different slurs promulgate different sorts of harm. The use of slurs for immigrant groups in their host nations predicts an increase in immigrant suicide rates (Mullen and Smyth 2004). In contrast, slurs directed at non-vulnerable groups appear to lack the power to undermine their targets' social standing, and they do not foster the kind of oppressive social environment that slurs for vulnerable groups engender (Embrick and Henricks 2013). To the extent that the use of a slur wrongfully undermines its target's social standing (or leads to other forms of oppression), or

[11] McIntosh (2000) articulates a number of privileges afforded to people on the basis of their perceived whiteness.

cultivates an objectionable identity in users, its use is morally impermissible. If, on the other hand, slurs for non-vulnerable groups do not have these wrong-making features and they have a positive role to play in the moral lives of users, their use need not be objectionable (though, as I note below, borderline cases may be possible).

The fact that a group is vulnerable does not entail that its members are entitled to slur others or that the group's members should not be slurred. Hate groups like the KKK and neo-Nazis are vulnerable in that their views are widely rejected by the society at large, and their members are often ridiculed and ostracized because of their membership, yet it is plausible that derogating members of such groups with slurs as a means of reinforcing their vulnerability (*qua* members of noxious hate groups) is permissible.[12] The KKK is a paradigm example of a group whose vulnerability is warranted, in part, because of the reprehensible goals and plans it pursues, which include terrorizing members of vulnerable racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation groups (among others). Further, these goals are motivated by white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and other objectionable attitudes that are central to the Klan identity (Ferber 1998). White supremacists' problematic identity helps explain why they should be powerless *qua* white supremacists. The reason that derogating people on the basis of their membership in a vulnerable or marginalized racial group is wrong is that no actual people should be disenfranchised because of their race.[13] It is uncontroversial that the vulnerability of deaf people is not warranted. Sources of their vulnerability include institutional injustices such as limited access to opportunities for education due to a lack of adequate support services and facilities for deaf students at schools and universities (Thoutenhoofd 2000, 263). Given that the KKK should be vulnerable because of features of its group identity, while deaf and indigenous peoples' vulnerability is not warranted and their group identities are not objectionable, we can see why it is permissible for the latter groups to use slurs for a powerful majority to reinforce their own group identities yet impermissible for the former to do the same.

In some cases, the moral status of slurring in order to cultivate a group identity is less than obvious. The elderly are vulnerable in a number of ways, and their vulnerability is of course not warranted. It is not clear that the elderly have anything like a group identity, though such an identity could exist. Would it be permissible for elderly people to slur young adults (seemingly, a non-vulnerable group) by calling them "snot noses," e.g., in order to cultivate or reinforce a group identity? The answer depends, in part, on the kind of self-conception they would be nurturing in doing so, and this is not the sort of thing we can know about a priori. Suppose that the use of "snot nose" encourages some sort of anti-youth ageism among the elderly. If this is an objectionable way of thinking, then we may have reason to believe that the use of this slur by elderly people is impermissible. However, it is an open question whether all forms of ageism are *in principle* objectionable. Since we would need to know a great deal more about a group identity that includes ageism in order to make an assessment as to whether such an identity is objectionable, settling this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

[12] I take it one can ridicule someone on the basis of membership in a white supremacist group without also disparaging them on the basis of membership in an innocent vulnerable group (e.g., being unemployed or living below the poverty line).

[13] However, we can imagine beings that ought to be vulnerable because of the kind of beings they are (cf. May 2005). Suppose a "race" of parasitic alien invaders show up to Earth. Arguably, the use of slurs intended to make this group vulnerable need not be objectionable.

The defense of slurs offered here is intended to be neutral with respect to different normative theories. I have argued that slurring is morally valuable as a form of protest. A victim may slur a group to protest the way she has been treated by them and thereby maintain her self-respect. Third-party protesters may slur a group to maintain their integrity. For deontologists, self-respect and integrity are non-instrumentally valuable (Hill 1979). On a consequentialist framework, however, protest with slurs may be valuable when it motivates members of a group to reflect on their bad-making features and to make a positive change (cf. Bell 2013, 160). Virtue theorists may think of the value of protest in a different way. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1999) suggests that failing to protest when one is wronged would make one foolish and slavish (1126a6-11). Additionally, I have noted that the use of a protest slur by third-party observers may be morally valuable as an act of solidarity with those victimized by the target group. Solidarity with victims may be valuable on a consequentialist framework, e.g., when it alleviates the victims' suffering. While the suffering of victims should matter to third-party protesters, on some views, the performance of an act of solidarity with victims is morally valuable even if the victims themselves are never aware of it and even if no tangible good consequences result from it (see, e.g., Harvey 1999, 72–3).

One obvious consequentialist motivation for a vulnerable group's reinforcing their group identity by means of slurring a powerful group is that doing so may lessen the burdens of vulnerability and marginalization (Heyes 2012). However, as we will see, group identities may be necessary for establishing group rights. Some theorists argue that group rights are essential for group autonomy (see, e.g., Kymlicka 1995 and Killmister 2012), and the value of autonomy can be acknowledged on a variety of different normative theories.

3 Pro Tanto Wrongs

One could object to the use of slurs by pointing to various pro tanto wrongs that speakers or signers may commit in derogating targets. First, non-vulnerable people may find the use of slurs for their group insulting (Croom 2015, 148). Suppose George, a white man whose hearing ability is typical, is deeply offended when he observes deaf individuals using the ORAL slur in reference to him, and when members of an indigenous group ridicule and disparage him for his whiteness. Presumably, the fact that a behavior is offensive provides defeasible evidence that one ought not to do it, and so one may argue that the potential for offense undermines the positive role that slurring plays in the construction of Deaf and indigenous identities. A different worry stems from the fact that one could be a member of a non-vulnerable group and a vulnerable group simultaneously. This allows for individuals to be both privileged and oppressed in different ways (Young 1990, 42). Given that privilege and vulnerability often intersect, it may seem difficult to determine who is a morally permissible target of slurs.

To further elucidate these two challenges and to see how best to answer them, it will be helpful to distinguish *ostensible targets* of a slur *s*, i.e., the individual(s) referred to with a slur on a particular occasion of use, from *s' target group* (Jay 2009, 83). The set of all hearing individuals constitutes the target group of the ORAL slur in ASL. An individual may be a member of the group consisting of people who can hear, which is plausibly non-vulnerable, as well as a member of other groups that happen to be

vulnerable. Suppose that Naomi, a child who is not a member of a Deaf community, has just received a cochlear implant, and so she is a potential ostensible target of ORAL. Even though Naomi is now privileged by virtue of being able to hear, she is also still vulnerable in various ways, and so we might worry that in this case, derogation with ORAL may hurt Naomi more than someone whose hearing ability is typical.

In answering these challenges, we need not assume that the goal of reinforcing a Deaf or indigenous identity is morally significant such that personal offense does not detract from its value. Fortunately, signers may perform ORAL without targeting any specific hearing individual and only when no hearing individuals are present. In cases where a group's identity-cultivating slur is a word, members may utter the term only within their own group (or silently to themselves by means of inner speech). In general, we have no reason to think that cultivating a group identity with slurs crucially depends on the speaker or signer having any ostensible target, or on the presence of anyone who falls within the slur's extension, or even on the target group's knowing that they are being slurred. A group's practice of using a slur may be (and often is) an internal practice of the group. Thus, the use of a slur need not insult or offend anyone, and so worries about incurring offense need not arise.[14] Appreciating the point that the use of a slur need not have an ostensible target helps deflate a different objection: slurring a powerful majority could lead to retaliation and as a result, may endanger vulnerable people or their allies.[15] Since targets need not be aware that they are being slurred, uses of slurs need not provoke retaliation.

A final worry is that group identities are objectionable because they foster essentialist attitudes about group membership. One common concern is that any kind of group identity will inevitably foster a homogenous conception of the group that leads to the exclusion of outsiders. If group identities are objectionable *in principle*, the use of slurs designed to cultivate group identities would be impermissible.

We need not assume that group identities are completely innocuous, even when the group in question does not manifest bad-making features. It is likely that group identities will arise, since strangers who encounter one another in new cities tend to "renew their ethnic, locale, age, sex and occupational group identifications" (Young 1990, 47). A fortiori, a Deaf identity seems inevitable given the communicative differences among deaf people and the majority of hearing people. Further, one independent motivation for maintaining group identities is that they provide a basis for certain group-differentiated rights and entitlements (Kymlicka 1995; Killmister 2012, 2014). These include the right to an interpreter, special claims to land, which Aboriginal Australians are entitled to under the Native Title Act of 1993, exemption from local laws that place limitations on fishing and hunting, various forms of affirmative action, including preferential admission to universities, and protection from hate speech (Killmister 2014, 92). While some of the aforementioned rights may be controversial, the wholesale rejection of group-differentiated

[14] This is not to suggest that the use of slurs is wrong only to the extent that targets are offended. As I noted above, the use of a slur may be impermissible because of its role in cultivating an objectionable identity, and utterances of a slur may do this independently of whether anyone finds them insulting.

[15] Cf. hooks (1995, 13) on the dangers of expressing rage as a member of a marginalized group: "We learned when we were very little that black people could die from feeling rage and expressing it to the wrong white folks. …Rage was reserved for life at home—for one another."

rights would be too quick.[16] As Killmister (2014) observes, in some contexts, members' self-conception *as members of a group* may be an important factor in determining whether they have the relevant rights or entitlements. The Deaf community's self-identification as an ethnic and linguistic minority provides a basis for their demand for resources to promote American sign language. For instance, the Bilingual Education act "provides funding for a variety of programs promoting the use of minority languages in the schools, and civil rights statutes…impose an affirmative duty on the schools to give children who speak a minority language an equal educational opportunity by lowering the English language barriers" (Lane 2005, 297). When deaf people are understood as disabled members of a hearing society and not an ethnic minority, they may lose these rights and entitlements (Lane 2005, 206).

Adopting a pluralistic conception of group membership will help circumvent worries about essentialism and will also help further alleviate concerns about intersectionality. Pluralism allows that in some contexts it may be sufficient for membership in an indigenous group that one lives in a community with indigenous people, speaks the language, and is entrusted with certain rituals. However, if the question is whether one's group membership affords one special welfare benefits or preferential admission to universities, one's lineage and whether they have suffered from a history of discrimination may be crucial in determining who counts as an indigenous person (Killmister 2014). A pluralistic account of group membership allows that hearing people, including those who are hard-of-hearing, may be members of a Deaf community. It is plausible that hard-of-hearing people should not be excluded from Deaf communities, even though they may be classified as "hearing" in some contexts. Pluralism also allows that hard-of-hearing people should not count as hearing for the purposes of determining who is among the ostensible targets of the ORAL slur, since they often face challenges and discrimination by the society at large due to their limited hearing abilities.[17] In fact, people who are not deaf are often welcomed into Deaf communities. Many hard-of-hearing people who had not previously conceived themselves as members of the Deaf community "have chosen to embrace a Deaf identity because of social and communicative difficulties in the hearing world," and such individuals who use sign language have no problem socializing within Deaf circles (Grushkin 2003, 126). Relatedly, Christiansen and Leigh (2004) report that deaf children given cochlear implants do not become isolated from their Deaf peers and friends as a result. Further, as noted previously, translators and others whose hearing ability is typical may be accepted into Deaf communities under various circumstances. Thus, if the practice of slurring hearing people is widespread in Deaf communities, it does not seem to predict the exclusion of non-deaf individuals from these communities (though this is an empirical claim whose verification may require further observation). It seems, then, that the practice of constructing a group identity through derogation of hearing people need not be in tension with promoting group diversity and rejecting an inflexible, essentialist group identity.

[16] Killmister (2012) defends an account of group rights based on groups' interest in preserving their identity and cultural practices that take into account challenges posed by noxious group (see, e.g., Barry 2001).

[17] I will leave it open whether people whose hearing is typical and are not vulnerable in other ways are morally permissible ostensible targets of the ORAL slur.

4 Conclusion

Previous philosophical work on slurs has not addressed the question of whether derogation with slurs is a morally valuable activity. I have argued that derogatory uses of slurs have a valuable role to play in users' moral lives in two sets of cases. In the first, slurs are vehicles for protest. The use of protest slurs is valuable for those who have been victimized by the target group (as a way for victims to maintain their self-respect) and non-victims (as a way of reaffirming their moral integrity, and as an act of solidarity with victims). Other slurs are vehicles for constructing a group identity. One example is the ORAL slur in ASL, whose function is to construct and reinforce a Deaf identity by distinguishing the in-group from the out-group as well as highlighting what is special and distinctive about Deaf communities vis-à-vis the hearing community. One motivation for maintaining group identities is that they provide a basis for certain group rights, which on some views are necessary for group autonomy.

In general, the value of slurring needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. There is a great deal more to say about when slurring groups is morally objectionable. At what point should one abandon the project of trying to change a group to which one belongs and resort to dissociating oneself from them with a slur as a form of protest? I take this paper to be one step in a series of larger, incremental projects. The step undertaken here was to illuminate the moral value of slurring in a range of cases. Further steps include determining how severe and incorrigible a group's bad-making features need to be in order to make it an appropriate target of protest slurs, and determining the moral status of derogation in borderline cases in which a group's identity is not clearly innocuous.

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