Resisting Well: Four Principles of Reasonable Resistance

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ABSTRACT

There are countless calls to resist, oppose, and protest various things. We might, for example, be called upon to resist gender inequality in the workplace, laws that restrict women’s access to abortion, or systematic injustices that are directed towards members of minority groups. But how might we resist well? This paper aims to answer that question. I begin with a brief definition of “resistance.” Next, I provide four principles that allow us to measure how reasonable an instance of resistance is. Generally, the more an instance of resistance satisfies these principles, the more reasonable it is. If successful, this project has important implications for the dialogue between parties that disagree over what should (or should not) be resisted.

INTRODUCTION

There are countless calls to resist, oppose, and protest various things. We might, for example, be called upon to resist gender inequality in the workplace, laws that restrict women’s access to abortion, or systematic injustices that are directed towards members of minority groups. But how might we resist well? This paper aims to answer that question. I begin with a brief definition of “resistance.” Next, I provide four principles that allow us to measure how reasonable an instance of resistance is. Generally, the more an instance of resistance satisfies these principles, the more reasonable it is. If successful, this project has important implications for the dialogue between parties that disagree over what should (or should not) be resisted.

Consider, for instance, that principles of logic allow us to evaluate an argument independently of whether we believe the argument’s conclusion is true or not. The principles I develop here allow us to evaluate the reasonableness of an agent’s resistance whether we agree with the resister that the object they resist deserves to be resisted or not. Parties that disagree over which object(s) should be resisted, therefore, may use these principles to set their differences aside and enter into a new type of conversation with one another. Ideally, this process will promote greater understanding between people with diverse perspectives.

I. RESISTANCE

I understand resistance as follows:

Resistance: A relation between an agent, S, and an object, Z, where, if S bears this relation toward Z, then S opposes Z because S deems Z to be unacceptable.

For the sake of space, I cannot defend this account of resistance. I will unpack it a bit, however. The “opposition” component of resistance is a mirror image to Adams’ (2006) “being for.” When

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1 I take it that resistance is a kind of opposition, while protest is a kind of resistance. Unpacking those concepts goes beyond the scope of this paper, so I will use these terms (e.g. resist, oppose, protest) somewhat interchangeably.
an individual is for something this may include her “loving it, liking it, respecting it, wanting it, wishing for it, appreciating it, thinking highly of it, speaking in favor of it and otherwise intentionally standing for it symbolically, acting to promote or protect it, and being disposed to do such things” (15-16). So, when S resists Z—insofar as S opposes Z—then S hates Z, dislikes it, wants it removed or revised, speaks against it or stands against it (symbolically or otherwise), etc. Supposing resistance must occur in action—as Hollander and Einwohner (2004) suggest—then we may add that the relevant kind of opposition must occur in action (of some kind).²

Objects of resistance may include establishments, policies, actions, decisions, or states of affairs. When an agent “deems an object to be unacceptable,” I just mean that they believe it to be unacceptable (morally or otherwise) or they see it as such. As Roberts (2010) points out, agents’ beliefs about an object and the way they see it (i.e. their construal of the object) may conflict. For example, a person may believe that flying on an airplane is safe while construing it as a threat to her safety (see Roberts 2010: 36-7). Thus, deeming may involve agents’ beliefs about an object, their construal of it, or both.

II. RESISTING WELL

There are (at least) four principles by which we can separate reasonable instances of resistance from unreasonable instances. Generally, resistance is reasonable (or excellent) to the extent that it satisfies the following four principles; unreasonable to the extent it violates them.³ The four principles are: Consistency, Proportionality, Acceptance-Readiness, and Cost-Effectiveness. I will discuss each in turn (Sections III-VI) before discussing possible exceptions to these principles (Section VII).

III. CONSISTENCY

Consistency comes in two varieties. We may speak of consistent resistance or consistent resisters. Regarding the former, resistance is consistent when the form the resistance takes—i.e., the opposition that the agent engages in—does not conflict with the reason(s) that are driving the agent’s resistance.

Suppose, for example, that Sam believes all non-human animals should be protected (i.e. not killed). By extension, Sam believes that the practice of killing animals for food involves the termination of innocent life. As such, Sam deems the practice of killing animals for food (and slaughterhouses that engage in this practice) to be morally unacceptable. In opposition to a slaughterhouse, Sam bombs it, killing more than a dozen people, dozens of animals, and wounding many more in the process.

Sam’s resistance violates the principle of consistency. The reason that drives her to resist is that all non-human animals should be protected. But the form of Sam’s resistance—her bombing the slaughterhouse and thereby killing dozens of non-human animals—is in conflict with that

² I think Hollander and Einwohner (2004) are wrong to say that resistance must occur in action. But that is a debate for another time.
³ This is a general claim because (as I note in Section VII) there are exceptions. Additionally, reasonable (or “excellent”) resistance is not the same as ethical resistance. This is not so different from saying that validity (with respect to arguments) is a separate measure than a moral assessment of the statements that form an argument. Morally questionable statements can serve as premises in valid arguments. In the same way, morally questionable resistance may be excellent (insofar as it conforms to the principles I develop here). But that is to be expected, since the principles I develop are not designed to provide a moral evaluation of an agent’s resistance.
reason. Put differently, Sam’s resistance embodies the same negative feature(s) that drove her to oppose the slaughterhouse in the first place. This makes her resistance inconsistent. It is, therefore, subject to scrutiny (whether we agree with Sam that slaughterhouses are bad or not).

On the other hand, resisters are consistent when the form of opposition they engage in does not conflict with their own commitments. Suppose, for example, that Shelly believes animal products should not be destroyed (for any reason). Yet, when a political candidate she despises is elected, she protests by hurling eggs at the candidate’s car. Here, what drives Shelly to protest—her political commitments—do not (obviously) conflict with the form her opposition takes. But her personal commitments (regarding her beliefs about animal products) are in conflict with her actions. So, she is inconsistent even if her resistance is not. If one wishes to focus on evaluating resistance (not resisters), however, this form of (in)consistency should be set aside.

IV. PROPORTIONALITY

Resistance is proportional when the strength of an agent’s opposition is in proportion to how unacceptable she perceives the relevant object to be. The strength of agents’ opposition may be measured in terms of the types of actions associated with their opposition, the amount of time and energy they devote towards resisting, the costs they are willing to pay to resist, the breadth of contexts in which they resist, and so forth. All else being equal, an agent who is willing to destroy the object of their resistance opposes that object in a very strong way. The same goes for agents who devote lots of time and energy to resisting an object and those who are willing to pay high costs by resisting (in each case, agents’ opposition is quite strong).

Proportionality may be violated in one of two ways (generally): The agent’s opposition may be too strong or too weak. Agents that do little (or nothing) to oppose an object they perceive to be a tremendous evil are subject to scrutiny. So are agents that overreact by heavily opposing objects they perceive to be minor inconveniences. Thus, all else being equal, agents who discover they oppose an object too weakly (given their perception of it) should work to oppose it to a greater degree. And those who discover they oppose an object too strongly should work to reduce the strength of their opposition.

V. ACCEPTANCE-READINESS

Resistance is acceptance-ready when the following two conditions are met:

(i) The agent has a sufficient understanding of what would follow were her resistance to succeed in bringing about the change it is working towards, and

4 Alternatively, we could say that an agent’s resistance is proportional when the strength of her opposition is in proportion to how unacceptable an object is. I reject this approach. It seems reasonable to strongly resist what one takes to be a significant threat. Our beliefs about (or perception of) objects may be mistaken, of course. Yet even in those cases, the error lies in how we view an object, not in our strong opposition to it. If I genuinely believe that there is a grizzly bear in my living room, it is reasonable that I panic and flee (i.e., my reaction is appropriate) even though my beliefs (or perception) are flawed.

5 Because of this, proportionality might be seen as a kind of mean between two extremes, akin to how Aristotle thinks of virtue generally (NE 1106b.34-1107a.5).

6 Section VII shows, however, that violations of proportionality (in either direction) may sometimes be justified given extenuating circumstance(s). As with each of the four principles, the principle of proportionality is a general rule.
(ii) The agent does not balk or hesitate when offered the change she is working towards (at least, when the change is offered on terms that she claimed or implied would be unacceptable).

Regarding condition (i), resistance often aims at the undoing, defeating, revising, destroying, etc., of some object. That is the change resistance “works towards.” As for a “sufficient understanding” of the consequences of this change, what counts as “sufficient” may be somewhat vague.

Acceptance-readiness does not require that agents know about all consequences that would follow from the relevant change. That would likely be impossible (especially when considering the long-term impact that one’s resistance may have). At the same time, it seems unreasonable to resist an object while being totally ignorant of the consequences that would follow were one’s resistance to succeed in bringing about the relevant change. Resisters like that are, perhaps, like children that struggle to break free from their parents and run into the street to chase something that catches their eye. They are unaware of the costs of their actions and opening themselves up to very negative and foreseeable consequences. Reasonable resistance (generally) is not so thoughtless.

Regarding condition (ii), suppose an agent balks at accepting the change she sought. We might ask: Was she not serious about seeking the relevant change? Was her resistance a bluff? Had she not weighed or understood the costs of the relevant change (and so, violates the first condition of acceptance-readiness as well)? Resisters that are serious about their opposition—and not just playing games—should be prepared to accept the consequences of success (should it be made available on their terms, at least).

Lastly, satisfying condition (ii) does not require that the agent accepts the relevant change without any concern about its “costs.” That is, the costs may still be painful to accept. Condition (ii) simply requires that the costs have been counted and accepted by the resister (ideally before the relevant change is made available).

VI. COST-EFFECTIVENESS

Cost-effectiveness is more complicated than the other three principles. Building on the definition of resistance given in Section I, when an agent, $S$, resists an object $Z$ on the basis of $Q$, then the following conditions are met:

a) Some feature(s) of $Z$, labeled $Q$, is/are perceived by $S$ in a negative way, and
b) $S$‘s negative perception of $Q$ is the reason $S$ deems $Z$ to be unacceptable.

In short, $Q$ includes the negative features of $Z$ that lead $S$ to resist $Z$. In $S$‘s mind, it may be that $Z$ constitutes, possesses, includes, embodies, or entails $Q$.

With this in mind, let $P$ be something $S$ is actually attached to (or the well-being of such an attachment). Resistance is cost-effective when the following conditions are met:

There is no $P$, such that

(i) The agent prefers $P$ to its absence,
(ii) The agent believes that $P$ cannot be obtained without $Q$, and
(iii) The agent deems $Q$ to be a cost “worth paying” for $P$ (or the agent is unsure whether or not $Q$ is a cost worth paying for $P$).
To illustrate a violation of cost-effectiveness, imagine an agent, Brooke, leads others in boycotting a factory that has been polluting a local lake. The factory owner (truthfully) states that the factory cannot operate without producing pollution in this way. The factory also employs Brooke’s brother (and Brooke cares deeply about her brother). Should the factory close, Brooke’s brother would be unemployed and—given his personal history—would certainly be unable to find comparable employment. Thus, the factory’s shutdown would drastically undermine his well-being.

Brooke desires that her brother flourishes rather than not (and so, satisfies the first condition). Suppose, for a moment, she recognizes that her brother’s well-being depends on the factory’s continuing to operate (and so, satisfies the second condition as well). If Brooke satisfies the third condition—and, therefore, maintains that the factory’s continued operation is “worth the cost” of the pollution it produces—then she both opposes and supports the factory’s continued operation. Her opposition takes form in her boycott, while her all-things-considered judgment is that the factory should remain open. This forms a kind of contradiction. That is, Brooke seems to be demanding that the factory cease operation while continuing to operate.

Suppose the factory owner offers to shut the factory down. Given that Brooke maintains $Q$ (the pollution) is a cost “worth paying” to preserve her brother’s well-being ($P$), she will insist that the factory remain open. The owner may be left scratching her head, asking “what do you want to see happen here?” There is no way to satisfy Brooke’s demands. The factory cannot both cease to operate and continue to operate. And since $Q$ (the pollution) is a necessary consequence of the factory’s operation, were Brooke to insist that the factory continue its operation while eliminating $Q$, she would still be demanding the impossible. In fact, in that case she would knowingly be demanding the impossible, given that she satisfies condition (ii).

What if Brooke failed to satisfy condition (ii)? It would still true that $P$ cannot be obtained without $Q$. Brooke simply fails to notice the connection between $P$ and $Q$. Additionally, if we hold everything else fixed, Brooke still satisfies conditions (i) and (iii): She prefers $P$ to its absence and, if asked, would say that $Q$ is a cost “worth paying” to secure $P$ (on the hypothetical assumption that $Q$ is required to obtain $P$). But she is not in violation of the principle of cost-effectiveness, since she does not believe that $Q$ is required to obtain $P$. Thus, her ignorance prevents her from violating cost-effectiveness.

The problem is that Brooke’s ignorance also places her in violation of acceptance-readiness (particularly its first condition). Worse still, given that Brooke satisfies condition (iii) of cost-effectiveness, her oversight of the connection between $P$ and $Q$ is substantial. She seriously underappreciates (or misjudges) the foreseeable consequences of her resistance. The moral is this: Even if an agent’s resistance satisfies one of the four principles outlined here (e.g., cost-effectiveness), when we evaluate her resistance according to multiple principles, it may still turn out that her resistance is fairly unreasonable overall.

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7 In the final part of this section, I will consider what would follow if Brooke overlooked this connection.
8 If she fails to insist that the factory remain open—and instead, accepts her brother’s misfortune as a cost of the factory’s closing—then she does not satisfy condition (iii). But I have already stipulated that she satisfies (iii).
9 Similarly, even if an argument contains one true premise, it does not follow that the argument—when assessed overall—is sound.
VII. VIOLATIONS AND EXCEPTIONS

The four principles of reasonable resistance developed here are *general* rules. There will be plenty of exceptions to these principles. A discussion of these exceptions arises naturally when considering how to respond to an instance of unreasonable resistance.

For example, imagine a resister discovers that her resistance violates consistency. This leaves her with three options (at least): Abandon her resistance, adjust her resistance in a way that avoids inconsistency (e.g., by changing the form of her opposition so that it no longer conflicts with the reasons driving her to resist), or explain why this particular violation of consistency is justified. A similar trilemma arises for resisters that violate the other principles of reasonable resistance. Those who violate proportionality, for example, may abandon their resistance, adjust the strength of their opposition appropriately, or explain why this particular violation of proportionality is justified.

In each case, option three involves an appeal to an exception. Maybe the resister believes that the form of her opposition—though it leads to a violation of consistency, proportionality, etc.—is the only form of opposition likely to affect any real change (and the goods associated with the sought-after change, in the resister’s mind, outweigh whatever negatives are associated with being unreasonable). This route leads to a discussion of whether or not the resister’s beliefs are justified, whether or not the sought-after change is such a great good, and so forth.

As an illustration of how violations may be justified, imagine a diplomat, Serena, is addressing world leaders that are on the verge of initiating a deadly war. Serena knows that her audience is not well-versed in principles of logic. She also knows that were she to make a particular argument (which she knows is fallacious) that there is a high probability she will be able to dissuade these leaders from starting a war. As such, she presents the argument and her audience accepts it. War is averted.

I doubt many people would find fault with Serena’s decision. Yet, even if we grant that she did the right thing, that does not imply that the argument she made is a good argument. It may have been effective at bringing about a highly desirable state of affairs. But when assessed *as an argument* (e.g., according to principles of logic) it is defective. Serena’s situation compares to the situation of some resisters that violate the principles of reasonable resistance. There may be some overarching justification for certain violations. But that justification does not imply the resistance under examination is reasonable in a narrow sense (i.e. when assessed according to the principles outlined here).

Of course, one may wonder: Why care about the being reasonable in a narrow sense? Perhaps the only measure worth considering (when it comes to resistance) is whether the resistance is *successful* in affecting the change it drives towards. I lack the space to give this objection its due, but I will sketch a response to it. The objector’s perspective may be applied to arguments as well. That would mean that the only measure worth considering (when it comes to arguments) is whether an argument is successful in convincing the audience to believe its conclusion. Yet, this total emphasis on results—in both cases—strikes me as wrongheaded. There is more to arguing well than convincing others. Likewise, there is more to resisting well than bringing about change.

Perhaps my intuitions on these matters are not shared, however. In that case, I may simply deflect the objection. The point of the essay has been to explore ways of resisting in a reasonable
manner. It is not a defense of the claim that we should care about being resisting in a reasonable manner.10

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have described four principles of reasonable resistance. An instance of resistance may be evaluated using these principles whether or not we agree with resisters (that the object they resist should be resisted). As such, these principles create a new space for discussion between parties that hold differing perspectives.

In cases where we judge an instance of resistance to be reasonable, we may gain greater insight into (and appreciation of) the resister’s perspective. In cases where we judge an instance of resistance to be unreasonable, the principles here provide a variety of paths the discussion may take. We may seek to persuade the resister to give up their resistance, to adjust their resistance in ways that do not violate the relevant principles, or to provide an overarching justification for the relevant violation(s). Regardless of which path we pursue, the principles outlined here provide a framework for deep reflection on (and understanding of) particular instances of resistance, particular resisters, and the reasons behind resistance.

REFERENCES


10 Still, there are good reasons to care about resisting in a reasonable manner (as I have outlined it). Adapting one’s resistance to satisfy consistency, for example, ensures that the resister does not participate in (or embody) the same evil that they aim to oppose. It seems plausible to me that if one truly wishes to oppose some evil, then one should not propagate that same evil.