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## NEWSLETTER ON FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

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## ARTICLES: FEMINIST VIRTUE THEORY AND ETHICS

**Andrea Nicki, Guest Editor**

### ***Introduction: Feminist Virtue Theory and Ethics***

**Andrea Nicki**

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Feminist philosophers have for long been preoccupied with formulating theories that respond to the damaging effects of various forms of oppression as well as developing strategies of resistance. Philosophers writing in the area of feminist virtue theory and ethics jostle or rearrange in different orders of importance or emphasis traditional moral virtues and vices in response to victimization and pain as part of a strategy to challenge oppressive values and practices. The authors writing in this issue of the *Newsletter* are concerned with identifying particular moral virtues that are especially relevant in the goal to end all forms of oppression; with challenging Western, racial, gender and class biases in traditional conceptions of moral virtues; and with challenging conceptions of some traditional moral vices and their alleged inevitable destructiveness.

Lisa Tessman argues that those who are lacking in traditional moral virtues—"the wicked"—can only enjoy their lives if they maintain an epistemic ignorance of their true "wicked" natures, based on a belief of themselves as morally good that is supported by similar others who are also committed to maintaining their privilege. Tessman recommends that one cultivate a (meta) moral virtue that would involve a disposition to be sensitive to the well-being or suffering of those lacking one's privilege.

Joan Woolfrey argues for the recognition of the moral virtue of feminist awareness, a disposition to draw attention to gender inequalities and practices. Exercising this virtue involves acting with Aristotelian moderation and practical wisdom. Woolfrey emphasizes the importance of feminist education and of cultivating continual awareness of one's and other's social markers in every interaction to produce responses that are sensitive, well-informed and inclusive.

Wendy Donner argues provocatively that wrath, and not simply moderate anger, can be morally good. Drawing on Buddhist teachings, she distinguishes anger as a creative force that arises from and is fuelled by compassion and that resists oppression from anger as a destructive force that involves aggression and brutality toward others. Controlling and subduing the full power of wrath can compromise the exercise of the virtue of feminist awareness and leave one with forgiveness and loving-kindness that are premature, as well as oppressive practices and abuses without vital opposition.

My own paper focuses on the creative potential of envy when informed by self-respect and compassion. I challenge the traditional (Ancient Greek) view of moral progression as necessarily involving an ever-increasing, harmonious expression of traditional moral virtues. I also advocate the inclusion of another moral exemplar in moral thought—a survivor of serious injustices who, previously despairing, achieves envy, rage, indignation, compassion and love.

Finally, Sandra Bartky boldly investigates and reevaluates the traditional moral vice of adultery in the context of the growing sexual self-determination of women and generally less sexually repressive cultural climate. She argues that in order for marital infidelity to be less of a vice and offset potential negative consequences, the non-adulterous spouse must exercise the moral virtues of patience, forbearance and understanding while the adulterous spouse must exercise the moral virtue of honesty.

### ***Do the Wicked Flourish? Virtue Ethics and Unjust Social Privilege***

**Lisa Tessman**

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I

In this paper I intend to analyze the lives of members of privileged groups through the lens of virtue ethics. In particular, I am wondering whether privilege that is conferred on a person because of his/her social positioning brings the wonderful and coveted things that one might expect it to: does it bring the ultimate good, namely, does it enable a person to flourish, to lead a/the good life? From Socrates's insistence (contra Thrasymachus) that the unjust cannot be happy, to the more contemporary, popular wisdom that "money don't buy you love," there is a history of suspicion about the goods that social, political, or economic power can bring. Perhaps what members of groups that are structurally positioned to exercise power have is not truly privilege; if they cannot lead flourishing lives, what good are the so-called advantages that they have?

Socrates's belief that the unjust cannot lead the good life constitutes a core assumption of virtue ethics. As Aristotle

more fully argues, flourishing depends upon virtue; eudaimonia is an “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue” (NE 1098a17). While this claim that the “wicked” cannot flourish has been much discussed in the literature on virtue ethics, I am interested here in a very particular, contextualized implication of it: if the claim is correct, then members of structurally privileged groups can only flourish if they are morally good.

However, although the privileged may enjoy especially ample opportunities to develop certain virtues,<sup>1</sup> it is at the same time hard to conceive of the privileged as morally good, because the so-called “privileges” that are under consideration here are those that result from unjust social positionings, positionings that depend upon systems of male dominance, white supremacy, class divisions under capitalism, norms of heterosexuality, and so on. Although to some extent one might unwillingly and hence innocently be a recipient of privileges that come with one’s position, generally speaking it takes having some vicious (“wicked”) characteristics—including at least a passivity with respect to the injustice of one’s privileges—in order to maintain oneself in a position of dominance. I will focus here on people who not only belong to dominant groups but who actively maintain their dominant positions and unjustly exercise power, or even engage in violence or abuse, against subordinate groups: the sexist or misogynist who thinks himself more important than or superior to women, or who discriminates against women or fights against measures to equalize women’s status, or even the one who batters or rapes women; the racist who spreads harmful stereotypes about people of color, who arranges his/her life so as to avoid contact with people of color, who supports policies that further disadvantage people of color, or who gathers with others in hate groups and terrorizes people of color on the street; the wealthy capitalist who exploits the labor of working people while remaining unsympathetic to the hardships of their strenuous, unsafe, or deadening working conditions, who resists redistributive measures that would equalize wealth. The people I am focusing on are not rare specimens, nor are they so common that they encompass just about everyone. Given my portrayal of them above, it would be hard to deny that they exhibit moral vices (such as cruelty, greed, self-centeredness, arrogance, cowardice) or at least the absence of certain specific moral virtues (perhaps compassion, generosity, cooperativeness, openness to appreciating others).<sup>2</sup>

If virtue theories are correct to assume that moral virtue is necessary for flourishing, then these people (the “wicked”) are far from ever attaining the good life. However, this is an odd claim to add to a theory of oppression, which one would expect to explain how the *victims* of oppression—rather than its beneficiaries—are denied a shot at the good life. I have argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that under a virtue ethics framework, one can conceive of the conditions of oppression as creating systemic barriers to flourishing, namely barriers that the victims of oppression run into; while these barriers consist primarily of external, structural features of the society, a virtue ethics approach suggests that there are also barriers to flourishing that become internal to the victims of oppression. That is, oppressed people typically experience systemically based moral damage because conditions of oppression may stunt the development of some of the virtues.<sup>4</sup> This description of oppression does not entail blaming the victim; rather, under

this description, one of the harms of oppression is that it is psychologically—and characterologically—damaging to oppressed people, which in turn diminishes their possibilities for leading flourishing lives.<sup>5</sup>

If people who are in positions of social, political or economic dominance also are unable to flourish because of a lack of moral goodness, then the claim that the oppressed are especially harmed by being morally damaged loses some of its force. Oppression seems to equally, though in quite different ways, affect everyone’s chances at developing the virtues and—if one accepts the connection between virtue and flourishing—thus negatively affects everyone’s chances at leading a/the good life. Oppression is not, according to this line of thinking, particularly more harmful (at least in this respect) to its victims than it is to its perpetrators.<sup>6</sup>

## II

Since it seems to be a mistake to maintain that oppression operates in this way, I return to the title question: do the “wicked” get to flourish? One difficulty in answering this question comes from a lack of clarity about what is meant by human flourishing or by the good life. What I will argue is that those who exhibit the vices associated with maintaining privilege do not get to flourish in anything like the Ancient Greek understanding of the term; however, the contemporary meaning of the word “happiness” is quite unlike eudaimonia or flourishing. And, the contemporary context permits for “happiness” without moral virtue, and certainly without requiring a unity of the virtues.<sup>7</sup> Given this, it turns out that members of dominant groups are in fact beneficiaries of oppression. They get to be vicious and still lead happy lives. Thrasymachus’s world has, so to speak, materialized.

Thrasymachus and Socrates differ on the question of whether it is through justice or injustice that one can be happy, because at base they differ on the question of whether happiness is attained alone or in harmony and unity with others. For instance, on the Socratic view a ruler is held back from flourishing as long as his [*sic*] subjects are living wretched lives (*Republic*, 341b-343d);<sup>8</sup> or, to quote the contemporary parallel from a bumper sticker, “no one is free while others are oppressed.” On the Socratic (or more widely Ancient Greek) view, the connection between moral virtue and human flourishing can be made because any one person’s moral virtue is understood in the context of a community/*polity* that depends on the virtue of its citizens in order to flourish as a whole. And, in turn, belonging (as a member in good standing) to a strong, flourishing polity is partly constitutive of leading a good life for any particular member of the *polity*. This is the Ancient Greek assumption that is key to the central claim of virtue ethics that one must be good to lead a good life. One’s goodness secures one a proper place in the polity; it is only within the polity that one’s life can be assessed, and the assessment depends upon the (good) *polity’s* (correct) understanding of what it is to be good, and what the good life is. For instance, one might be judged to be flourishing as a good citizen, or even further, as a good man [*sic*].<sup>9</sup> This is an objective assessment: a man [*sic*] might, for instance, believe himself to be happy/flourishing when he is not.<sup>10</sup>

### III

Contemporary theoretical developments of virtue ethics frequently focus on the question of whether it is really the case that one must be good in order to lead a good life. Indeed, separated from the Ancient Greek context, the claim that flourishing requires virtue seems quite implausible. These contemporary approaches often ignore or explicitly reject the assumption that the good life can only be achieved collectively, and pursue the question of whether moral goodness is “good for” the individual by asking whether moral goodness is *beneficial* to a self-interested individual, an individual who is also assumed to subjectively determine what will count as happiness in an assessment of his/her own life.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, this seems like the right approach now that conditions of and assumptions about life have changed so dramatically from the Ancient Greek context. There is no single, unified, harmonious polity to map a route to flourishing. Individual lives are fragmented into pieces as people move from work environments to home to neighborhoods to places of consumption where they may be anonymous; the virtues for home life may not only be achievable in the absence of the virtues for work life, and so on, but they may actually conflict with each other. The society itself is also fragmented into multiple, sometimes overlapping, sometimes clashing groups; these different “communities of sense” may hold opposing or at least divergent conceptions of what the good life is. Under these conditions, a person’s life cannot be assessed as a whole, and there is no objectively determinable “good life” for a person’s life to be measured against. Given all this, the link between virtue (especially as a unity) and flourishing would be difficult to support.

Instead of trying to resurrect this strong link, contemporary virtue theorists may believe that the most one can demonstrate is a link between some of the virtues and a subjectively determined account of happiness or of a good life. L. W. Sumner (1998), for instance, argues along these lines, first emphasizing a division of the virtues into “self-regarding” virtues (such as prudence), which clearly benefit the agent, and “other-regarding” virtues (generosity, fidelity, etc.), which seem not to.<sup>12</sup> His aim is to find a way of linking the other-regarding virtues to happiness, though by happiness he is concerned only with what he calls the “*prudential value* of a life, namely, how well it is going *for the individual whose life it is*” (21, emphases in original). He creates room for the link by stipulating that “a condition of someone’s life counts as an intrinsic source of well-being for her just in case she authentically endorses it, or finds it satisfying, for its own sake” (30), and by arguing that if one of the other-regarding virtues satisfies this criterion, then it is tied to happiness in more than just an instrumental way. Sumner does have a concern with this account: an evil agent may endorse one of the vices as a source of happiness, and because happiness is for him subjectively determined, it seems one would have to accept that vice as a real path to happiness. However, Sumner dismisses this problem because he is for the most part convinced that the evil agent’s endorsement of a vice would not be *authentic* (and thus the vice would not count as an “intrinsic source of well-being”) because it would either be mis/uninformed about the “facts” of the agent’s own life, or it would be externally manipulated (through indoctrination, etc.), both of which Sumner claims would undermine its

authenticity: “self-assessed happiness counts as well-being only when it is authentic—i.e., both informed and autonomous” (34).

### IV

While it is common in contemporary virtue theory to question the connection between virtue and flourishing, I am interested in a more specific version of this questioning since I am concerned with the case of members of privileged groups—who lack moral virtue in ways associated with the exercise of their dominance—and the possibilities for their flourishing. Sumner believes that the vicious will not tend to characterize themselves as morally good and their own lives as good lives or that they will do so only in ways that can be dismissed as based on an inauthentic self-assessment (inauthentic because of a lack of relevant information or a lack of autonomy). However, I believe that the people I am concerned with—those who actively maintain themselves in unjust social locations—will actually have a structurally supported tendency to believe in their own virtue and in the goodness and happiness of their lives, and it will be quite difficult to credibly dismiss these beliefs as inauthentic in the sense that Sumner means.

I have in mind two ways in which the privileged are especially enabled to exhibit character traits that I would describe as clearly vices (injustice, cruelty, lack of compassion, greed, etc.) and yet still lead a/the good life. First of all, they are especially enabled to believe in their own moral goodness no matter what their actual character traits may be, and secondly, they are able to hold a conception of the good life that is consistent with the sort of life they lead, and find widespread intersubjective agreement to confirm their sense of what the good life is.

Believing in one’s own moral goodness (regardless of its absence) is tied to what I think of as a “meta-vice,” namely indifference, or more specifically, indifference to the (preventable) suffering of certain others.<sup>13</sup> People actively occupying unjust positions of power tend to exhibit selective indifference to suffering—selective because they may be able to feel compassion for certain others, typically others positioned in some ways like themselves.<sup>14</sup> But they cannot allow themselves to be moved by the situations of those whose suffering is tied, directly or indirectly, to the very positions and privileges they actively work to maintain. Being moved in this way would disrupt the sense of themselves as morally good. Thus the husband who does not believe his wife’s “second shift” taking care of the children and the household constitutes an unfair level of extra work must remain indifferent to her exhaustion; the advocates of punitive welfare reform policies must avoid facing the realities of how anguishing it is to have to put one’s child in inadequate care or even leave one’s child dangerously unsupervised while one works a minimum wage job; the rapist may go so far as to think that his victim not only did not suffer from his actions, but even enjoyed herself. Indifference of this sort is a vice that enables other vices, for it permits its bearer to think of him/herself as a good person by masking the effects of his/her unjust, cruel, callous, violent, (and so on) actions. If a remaining link between virtue and well being lies in the fact that thinking of oneself as a morally good person contributes to one’s own happiness, then it will be important for members of privileged groups to be able to sustain an image of themselves as good.

Believing oneself to be living a good life is also—in the absence of the Ancient Greek reliance on an objective account of what the good life is—going to be partly constitutive of actually living a good life. Contemporary virtue theorists tend to accept that the modern conception of happiness is simply subjective and accept a life that is self-assessed as a good life to actually be a good life. I contend that we can still have more than this; we can at least require accounts of happiness or of a good life that are supported by intersubjective agreement within some community of sense. Members of dominant groups easily tend to find this intersubjective agreement, for their communities of sense easily can include only others similar to themselves in the relevant respects. Sumner portrays vicious agents as relying only on their own subjective sense of how good they are and what a good life they are leading—or perhaps finding their subjective sense informed or confirmed by sources that are clearly illegitimate from the point of view of most members of society. However, members of dominant groups find their own conceptions supported by very wide—and powerful, dominant—segments of society. These views cannot be dismissed easily as “inauthentic” (without offering in their place an objective account of the good), though it might be fruitful to try to use—as many feminist theorists have—complicated arguments about epistemic privilege in order to try to show that dominant beliefs are inauthentic in Sumner’s sense: either lacking correct factual information or lacking autonomy from coercively imposed ideologies.<sup>15</sup>

The most important feature of the intersubjectively supported account of the good life held by those who actively maintain their unjust privilege is the conviction that the good life for some does not depend on the flourishing of all. Unfortunately, it is false that “no one is free while others are oppressed,” for those who are not oppressed may find their happiness (and their freedom) by simply not noticing the others.

## V

Even without fully depending on the concept of epistemic privilege, one can still note that there are certain epistemic requirements for being able to live well despite—or because of—one’s vices. Both being able to think of oneself as morally good, and being able to sustain the intersubjectively confirmed understanding of the good life as one that does *not* depend on the flourishing of all, requires an epistemic isolation; knowledge cannot be gained from outside of the boundaries of groups of people similarly committed to maintaining their privilege.

This claim is consistent with, for instance, Charles Mills’s description in *The Racial Contract* of the epistemological contract that he sees as part of the overall racial contract that the supporters of white supremacy endorse. Those who are “signatories” to the racial contract (and who become its beneficiaries on account of the whiteness that they assign to themselves) must agree to maintain an ignorance about the racial order: “one has to agree to *misinterpret* the world... *on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance...*” (1997, 18; emphases in original). Similarly, María Lugones has observed that white feminists often maintain an epistemology of ignorance about their own place in the racial order; specifically, she points out that white feminists

are afraid of knowing the selves that they are in the eyes of women of color, and afraid of identifying with these selves precisely because doing so would undermine their sense of themselves as morally good (1991, 42). The epistemology of ignorance, to use Mills’s phrase, contributes to the well-being of members of privileged groups both because it allows them to believe themselves to be more virtuous than they are (which is important if having an image of oneself as morally good is partly constitutive of happiness), and because it facilitates the illusion that all is well in the world, that the good life can be achieved.

Thus, one can be happy while others suffer, and one can have one’s sense of well-being affirmed by the intersubjective agreement of others like oneself. But this is an agreement that I would argue ought to be refused. What to recommend in its place is harder to say. I would like to suggest the cultivation of a (meta-) virtue that would be the opposite of the (meta-)vice of indifference: a disposition that would leave one sensitive to others’ well-being or lack thereof; I say this with caution, however, for excess in the direction of such sensitivity leaves one in a constant state of anguish. There is such great suffering to face.

## Notes

1. Claudia Card (1996) argues that the moral luck arising from conditions of oppression may make certain virtues easier for beneficiaries of oppression—and harder for the oppressed—to develop. For instance, she points out that the virtue of “liberality” is generally not available to those without means to carry it out (4). She also recognizes, though, that privileged people are likely to develop certain vices (53).
2. Much of the virtue ethics literature speaks as if most people are basically virtuous (sometimes the reader is addressed as someone assumed to be virtuous: “*we* do x, the wicked do y”), and the unjust or people with other vices are unusual cases, sometimes bizarre, uncontextualized types such as someone named “Unscrupulous” (Hooker 1996). Within the virtue ethics tradition, an interesting exception to this tendency is Kekes 1998; outside of the virtue ethics tradition, see Shklar 1984 for a discussion of the significance (especially for liberal tolerance) of “ordinary vices.” Given the pervasive injustice of oppression, and given the high level of participation in maintaining structures of oppression, I see unjust and other vicious people as fairly ordinary.
3. See Tessman 2000 and Tessman 2001.
4. For a sustained discussion of moral damage under conditions of oppression, see Card 1996 (especially the first section of chapter three, for a consideration of how women may be morally damaged); I have relied heavily on Card’s work in developing my own analysis of moral damage.
5. For an argument *against* portraying the oppressed as morally damaged, see Walker 1998 (123-125); also see Scott 1997. I extensively consider the question of whether and in what ways it is problematic to associate moral damage with oppression in Tessman (2001).
6. Of course, since it is not *only* or not even *primarily* because of moral deficiencies that one is denied the possibility of flourishing, even from within this virtue ethics framework one could argue that oppression is more damaging to its victims than to its perpetrators. All the way back to Aristotle (with the exception of the Stoics), virtue ethicists recognize that favorable external conditions—such as access to sufficient material goods—are necessary, though not sufficient, for flourishing. (See NE 1099a31-b8 and 1101a14-16). The oppressed are clearly denied favorable external conditions in a way that members of dominant groups are not.
7. See Annas 1998 for an interesting discussion of the relation between virtue and *eudaimonia* and on the differences between the

Ancient Greek conception of *eudaimonia* and the modern conception of happiness.

8. However, Socrates/Plato and Aristotle, in thinking about states of affairs in which “all” are flourishing, fail to really include everyone in their “all”; furthermore, if one conveniently thinks, as Aristotle does, of the “good” for the slave to lie in being ruled by a master, it is easy to think of everyone as living the best possible lives without worrying further about whether the conditions of life under slavery really allow the slave a good life.

9. The key text to see for a full discussion of the differences between the Ancient Greek context and the modern context that are relevant for virtue and flourishing is MacIntyre 1981. MacIntyre also makes important distinctions within an Ancient Greek context, for instance, between a Homeric and an Aristotelian world. Because I am not developing any detailed account of Ancient Greek flourishing here, I am only noting some differences between Ancient Greek and modern/postmodern understandings of the relationship between virtue and happiness.

10. See Aristotle, *NE* Book III, chapter 4, where he notes that some people aim not at the real good, but at an apparent good, usually because they mistakenly confuse the pleasurable and the good.

11. Very clear examples of this are Sumner 1998, which I analyze below, and Hooker 1996. (Hooker distinguishes between asking whether moral virtue is *instrumentally* beneficial to an agent, and whether it is *constitutively* beneficial; nevertheless, he is still concerned with benefits to a self-interested individual.) Also see Driver 1996, Taylor 1996, and (for somewhat of a contrast) Hursthouse 1999 (chapter 8).

12. A somewhat less clearly demarcated division is outlined and problematized by Foot 1978 [1959]. Hooker (1996) relies on the same division as Sumner, stating that “the traditional problem of reconciling virtue with self-interest focuses... on other-regarding virtues,” (142) and further noting that “the potential for conflict between self-regarding virtue and self-interest is fairly slight... The focus on moral virtue leads to a focus on other-regarding virtue, since morality is (at least primarily) concerned with how one treats others” (142f); he overlooks how, for people who are in any relationship to each other, one’s own well-being and that of others is intertwined. I find an emphasis on the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding virtues to be problematic for any neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, but lack space here to develop the argument. Initially, the division might seem appealing—particularly for my purposes in this paper—because one might be tempted to claim that oppressed people are morally damaged because their opportunities to develop the self-regarding virtues are limited, while privileged people tend to develop the self-regarding virtues well but underdevelop the other-regarding virtues. While this would be a neat solution to the problem I pose in this paper—and while there is truth to the claim that some of the self-regarding virtues (think of confidence, self-esteem, proper pride) are battered under oppression—real life is more complicated than this clean division.

13. For an interesting discussion of indifference (and one that has influenced my thinking here), see Geras 1998.

14. It is in part for this reason that I am reluctant to conclude that the privileged tend not to develop the “other-directed” virtues such as compassion (see footnote 12); they may develop them, but exercise them towards a very limited range of others. See Spelman 1991, who cautions against speaking of a feminist ethic of care, given that many racially and economically privileged women’s caring tends to be limited in extension to others like themselves.

15. For a critique of the use of the concept of epistemic privilege, see Bar On 1993.

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