

Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation

Introduction

This essay will suggest that there can be a fruitful meeting-place of virtue ethics and feminist ethics. While it is possible to consider “care ethics” to be one such meeting-place, I will focus instead on what has been called “constitutive luck” in discussions of moral luck. Constitutive luck is luck that affects the formation of character, and it has been of interest to feminists such as Claudia Card,¹ who points out that being subjected to oppression affects the possibility of developing a good or virtuous character.² Following Card’s insight, I will explore how a virtue ethics framework may help feminist ethicists analyze the moral implications of the damage that is done to character by institutionally embedded social forces, that is, the damage done as a result of one kind of constitutive bad luck. This is something that an action-centered approach to ethics cannot offer to feminists, because while one can use an action-centered framework to identify which actions will serve feminist purposes, such as actions aimed at bringing about structural changes, an action-centered framework is not helpful for paying critical attention to character traits under oppression; such attention is important in part because oppression may thwart the development of traits that liberatory or feminist principles would identify as good ones, that is, virtues, including those traits that are necessary for engaging in resistance.

Through “the politics of personal transformation”—politics in which transformation of one’s self or character is meant to go hand in hand with working to bring about other sorts of liberatory changes—many

¹Claudia Card, *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

²Of course, oppression also creates morally damaged characters in oppressors, a fact that I would not want to deny, but the implications of which are different from those for members of oppressed groups. My interest is specifically in thinking about moral damage to the oppressed, because my concern is with the ways in which this damage hinders resistance. Thus I do not explore in this paper how oppressors are morally damaged; however, one could think, for instance, about how the character traits that allow one to actively dominate others, or even to be passively satisfied with benefiting unfairly from overprivilege, could be described as character flaws or vices.

feminists have tried to work critically on questions of character. However, I will point out that the concept of moral luck complicates the issue: if the way in which one's character is formed and how much it can be changed is subject to moral luck, particularly the bad luck of being affected by systems of oppression that can damage one's self by creating conflicts between one's dispositions and one's own liberatory principles, then one cannot just *will* one's dispositions to change. Thus it is not clear that a politics of personal transformation can really succeed, for its success would depend upon participants being able to bring their dispositions into line with their principles. The idea of moral luck makes it clear that one does not have complete control over the constitution of one's own character. I will suggest, however, that in the absence of reliable practices for transforming one's character, one might still make use of a virtue ethics framework to raise questions about how one should proceed in a context in which particular virtues are unavailable.

The Field of Moral Luck

Moral luck—an oxymoron in Kantian ethics where the will must be unconditioned—is that which is not within an agent's own control and yet affects the agent in a morally relevant way, by, for instance, influencing character, decisions, or actions. The concept of moral luck implies, as Margaret Urban Walker puts it, that "*responsibilities outrun control*";³ that is, one can be morally responsible, though in complex ways, for more than just that over which one has complete control. Moral luck may be good luck or bad luck; I take it to be bad luck when it interferes with living well or flourishing.⁴ While moral luck is always outside of the agent's own control, its source can vary: it could result from a natural event such as a hurricane; it could be caused by another person's actions, as in the case where a child darts in front of one's car; it could be

³Margaret Urban Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency," in Daniel Statman (ed.), *Moral Luck* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 241 (emphasis in the original).

⁴While I will not attempt to give a positive definition of flourishing, I would like to point out that without some notion of what is a greater rather than a lesser degree of flourishing, or put differently, a better rather than a worse sort of life, one cannot object to oppression based on what it does to a person who is subjected to it. To object to some specific forms of oppression one must be able to claim, for instance: that one lives better when one is not in fear of police brutality than when one is; that it is preferable for one to believe one deserves love than to believe one is beaten because one is bad; that self-chosen, meaningful work contributes more to flourishing than mind-numbing, repetitive labor does; that a good life is not characterized by the overwhelming loss of loved ones through racial or ethnic persecution; that the disintegration of self that occurs under torture destroys rather than enhances one's life.

due to what Claudia Card calls the "unnatural lottery," namely, circumstances that are systematically arranged and that tend to affect people as members of social groups. I will call the luck that is doled out by the unnatural lottery "systemic luck" to indicate its source in social systems, particularly systems of oppression; it is in this way distinguished from what might be called "natural" or "accidental" luck. For example, it can be due to systemic luck (in this case, bad luck) that a person suffers from the deprivation of poverty; there is nothing about this luck that is accidental, in that one can point to its systemic source in, for instance, capitalism.

The paradigm cases of moral luck issuing from the "unnatural lottery" that Card chooses to explore include:

the luck of middle- and lower-class women who face violence and exploitation in misogynist and class-hierarchical societies, of lesbians who face continuing pressure to hide or self-destruct in societies hostile to same-sex intimate partnerships, of culturally christian white women who have ethnic and color-privilege in white christian and racist societies, and of adult survivors of childhood abuse.⁵

Social systems confer disadvantages and, in most of the cases, also privileges, on these people; the unnatural lottery leads them to encounter both systemic barriers and open opportunities for developing certain virtues and flourishing. That is, they are subject to systemic bad luck and, in most cases, also some systemic good luck.

The distinction between systemic and non-systemic luck is not recognized by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel, who initiated the contemporary discussion of moral luck with their symposium on the topic;⁶ however, they do draw other sorts of distinctions between kinds of moral luck, distinctions that I also find useful. Williams, on whom I will focus here, draws a distinction between what he calls "constitutive luck" and "incident luck," where constitutive luck is that which affects the formation of character and is considered by Williams to be general, with sources that are not readily or precisely identifiable, and where incident luck is that which is directly relevant to whatever project, decision, or action is under moral evaluation. Williams sets constitutive luck to the side, presumably because he considers it to be too broad to raise any specific questions of moral responsibility, since it "affects everything."⁷ Incident luck he further divides into what he calls "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" luck. Luck whose source is intrinsic to a project that is a result

⁵Card, *The Unnatural Lottery*, p. 4.

⁶See Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁷Williams, "Moral Luck," p. 25.

of a decision that is to be morally evaluated is, for him, the most important, since bad intrinsic luck makes the decision retrospectively morally unjustified. Williams's primary example of this is in a fictionalized account of Gauguin, who abandons his wife and children to live the sort of life that he deems necessary for actualizing what he hopes is his potential to be a gifted artist. If it turns out—and one can know this only in retrospect—that he had no such potential after all, then what is revealed is a failure of something intrinsic to the project. He fails as an artist, as a result of something not within his control and therefore due to moral luck, but the something is intrinsic to his project of becoming a great artist; his decision to abandon wife and children becomes retrospectively unjustifiable due to this luck. Were he to have had good intrinsic luck—namely, were he to indeed have had the potential for great art—but bad extrinsic luck (and here Williams asks us to suppose Gauguin were to be injured on his way to Tahiti), his project would still fail, but he would not necessarily be morally unjustified in having made the decision to abandon his family.

While feminists can and have complained about Williams's assumption that if the project of becoming a great artist succeeds for Gauguin then he is morally justified in sacrificing his personal relationships and responsibilities,⁸ there are, for feminist purposes, reasons for revising not just Williams's examples but also his distinctions among varieties of moral luck. It may be most useful, for feminists, to think of the primary distinction within moral luck as that between what I am calling systemic luck and that which is non-systemic, being natural or accidental. Within what is systemic, one can then draw a further distinction by thinking, on the one hand, about the impact of systemic forces on the development of character, as Claudia Card does, and on the other hand, about the effect systemic forces have on making good and bad incident luck more or less likely. For instance, being an African-American male makes it more likely that one will encounter police harassment or brutality; encountering such treatment while carrying out a specific project can be described as bad incident luck, while the long-term effect that accumulated experiences of this sort may have, such as regarding oneself with double-consciousness, is an effect on character, and thus is constitutive luck.

I will be focusing, following Card, on systemic, constitutive moral luck. However, using Williams's distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic luck, I will focus even more specifically than Card does; I will examine those cases in which systemic, constitutive moral luck is *intrinsic* to one's project, for it is in the cases in which luck is intrinsic to a project that luck bears most heavily on one's taking moral responsibility

⁸See, for instance, Marilyn Friedman, "Liberating Care," in *What Are Friends For?* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

with respect to the project. To explore these cases, it will be necessary to identify the specific character traits that are developed through systemic, constitutive luck and corresponding ethico-political projects to which these character traits are intrinsically connected, where the success of the project depends upon working through the moral damage that manifests itself in one's character. For a simple example of this, consider the case of "pride" movements such as Black pride or gay pride, the success of which depends upon the possibilities of changing internalized forms of racism or homophobia, which are socially formed character traits; that is, the project is *about* changing character or disposition. If one's constitutive luck has been such that one's disposition proves impervious to change in the relevant respect, the project will fail, and will fail due to something intrinsic to the project itself. This example is of a case of systemic, constitutive, intrinsic moral luck.

Let me broaden the example a bit: generally, any feminist ethico-political project that fits under what has come to be called the "politics of personal transformation" will provide cases in which to examine systemic, constitutive, intrinsic moral luck. I take it that a feminist project counts as enacting the politics of personal transformation only if it centrally involves changing disposition or character in accordance with a feminist transvaluation of traditional virtues and vices. Thus, these are cases where failures and successes with respect to character are intrinsic to the project. In most such cases of a politics of personal transformation, a changed character is linked with liberation. Thus, for instance, traditional feminine virtues like self-sacrifice, when seen as interfering with a woman's capacity for valuing her own aspirations along with those of others, are critiqued and seen to be in need of changing through a politics of personal transformation. This change in character both enables and is enabled by changed social arrangements. For instance, freed from a self-sacrificing disposition, many women may choose not to mother under existing conditions, and may insist on changed conditions; those changed conditions, in turn, can discourage the development of a self-sacrificing disposition.

Conceiving of the politics of personal transformation as presenting cases of systemic, constitutive, intrinsic moral luck requires that there be a conceptual meeting-place of virtue ethics and feminist ethics. Virtue ethics and feminist ethics must meet to enable the examination of these cases because a virtue ethics approach suggests the focus on character and hence on constitutive luck, and the feminist insistence that attention be paid to systemic forces such as those of oppression lead to prioritizing the study of cases of systemic luck rather than accidental or natural luck. However, bringing moral luck into the discussion of the politics of personal transformation raises questions about how possible it really is to

take responsibility for changing one's character, the very thing that such a politics prescribes. Since the politics of personal transformation is a politics of liberation, particularly from the effect oppression has on the formation of selves (or characters), the moral luck that really must not be ignored within a politics of personal transformation is systemic, constitutive, intrinsic, bad moral luck. If such luck interferes seriously with being able to re-train one's character in accordance with one's liberatory principles, then a politics of personal transformation will not succeed as a feminist ethico-political project. I will thus turn next to Claudia Card's investigation of the possibilities for taking responsibility in the face of systemic, constitutive moral luck, especially when it is bad luck that is intrinsic to feminist ethico-political projects.

Claudia Card: Responsibility, Integrity, and Moral Damage

Card suggests that for feminists aiming to create moral or political change, what will be particularly relevant about moral luck is the questions it raises about moral responsibility—not in the backward-looking sense of assigning praise or blame for choices already made (which is the sense of responsibility central to Williams's and Nagel's discussions of moral luck)—but rather in the forward-looking sense of “taking responsibility” for future possibilities, including one's own future character. For her, moral agency is exercised through taking responsibility, and one who cannot take responsibility cannot fully be a moral agent. Since she focuses on the cases of those whose systemic, constitutive moral luck has disadvantaged them—that is, has given them an unequal opportunity for developing the virtues—her questions about taking responsibility presuppose that this is to be done given damage already sustained, and given continuing conditions that create barriers against successfully repairing this damage. These background conditions complicate the taking of responsibility, but they do not, according to Card, eliminate its possibility.

While taking or being assigned responsibility in the backward-looking sense can “ground judgments of desert,” the judgments that are relevant for the forward-looking sense of taking responsibility differ, in that “taking on responsibility from the perspective of agency may involve judgments of one's worthiness (or fitness) to do so and of the worthwhileness of doing so.”⁹ That is, taking responsibility in any forward-looking way requires that one ask and answer the question of what is to be done, that is, what is worth doing, and the additional, important question of whether one is capable of doing it, given one's virtues and

⁹Card, *The Unnatural Lottery*, p. 26.

vices at the “starting position” from which one takes a forward-looking perspective. Taking responsibility in this forward-looking sense can create opportunities for one to grow, morally speaking, since “we develop responsibility as a virtue by first *taking* responsibility in ways that out-run our apparent present worthiness to do so and then carrying through successfully.”¹⁰ Card describes three dimensions of forward-looking taking of responsibility; for all of these one needs to consider whether one is both constituted and situated in such a way to at least have a chance at successfully carrying through. These three dimensions are (1) undertaking to administer or manage something, (2) “agreeing to answer or account for something, or finding that one should be answerable, and then doing so,” and (3) committing to care for or “stand behind something, to back it, support it, make it good (or make good on one’s failure to do so), and following through.”¹¹

Card notes that “luck is involved both in the motivation to take responsibility and in our ability to carry through. Where that seems unfair, we may be able to take the unfairness into account, morally, in some of our evaluations.”¹² Taking unfairness—particularly the unfairness resulting from the unnatural lottery—into account does not mean excusing anyone from responsibility, since, as Card points out, “that our motivations and carryings through are embedded in factors beyond our control does not imply that there is no control after all”;¹³ rather, taking responsibility while recognizing unfair luck means that “we locate ourselves as morally relevant centers of agency”¹⁴ while understanding that, as Williams puts it, “one’s history as an agent is a web in which anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not.”¹⁵

It is because one cannot cleanly separate what is a product of the will from what is not that Card rejects a requirement for autonomy in the exercise of moral agency. Other people with whom one has relationships affect how one’s character is constituted and are thus a part of one’s moral luck; significant relationships “affect our basic values, our sense of who we are, our commitments, even our abilities to live up to those commitments.”¹⁶ Agency, then, must, “tolerate fuzziness in boundaries”¹⁷ between oneself and others. While conceiving of an agent as autonomous would require an assumption of immunity from some forms

¹⁰Ibid., p. 27.

¹¹Ibid., p. 28.

¹²Ibid., p. 27.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁵Williams, “Moral Luck,” p. 29.

¹⁶Card, *The Unnatural Lottery*, p. 30.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 30.

of moral luck, conceiving of an agent as—at least potentially—having integrity does not depend upon this assumption. It is thus integrity, which “involves considerations of consistency, coherence, and commitment,”¹⁸ that Card considers to be important to the exercise of moral agency in the taking of responsibility.¹⁹ However, integrity is not a simple achievement for those who have suffered moral damage as a result of oppression. Card claims that “to develop and maintain integrity, we need to discover, assess, and sometimes make changes in our values, traits, and capacities,” a process that is affected by luck to such an extent that “to determine whether it makes sense to hold an agent responsible, we need to know whether that agent’s luck made the development or maintenance of integrity impossible or impossibly difficult.”²⁰

Part of what makes moral integrity difficult, when it is possible at all, is understanding and possibly changing aspects of character that are acquired early in life if one later comes to see these as problematic, and reconciling the resulting changes in moral commitments. Card writes:

Since some of our most deeply ingrained values and traits begin in early unchosen relationships with significant others, we may have difficult work to find their roots, assess them realistically, and come up with a tolerably coherent set. Further, since our development can be highly unpredictable, it is likely to be a matter of luck if we do not find ourselves later in life committed to responsibilities that it made good sense to undertake only in terms of values we have since abandoned.²¹

Integrity—and thus responsible moral agency—may be unattainable for those who either cannot fully ferret out the sources of their dispositions, change these when appropriate, or manage to carry out old commitments without violating more recently gained convictions. Card claims that the sort of fragmentation that threatens integrity can be characteristic of those who are formed under conditions of oppression. In the case of those who develop multiple personalities—for instance, as a way of surviving child abuse—such fragmentation is quite literal, but even in other cases, Card notes that the oppressed “are likely to be sites of seriously warring inclinations, moods, likes, and dislikes elicited by the double-binds of oppressive institutions.”²²

Card understands integrity in terms of the integration of these opposing dispositions:

¹⁸Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁹For another sustained consideration of the problems of integrity under oppression, see Victoria M. Davion, “Integrity and Radical Change,” in Claudia Card (ed.), *Feminist Ethics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

²⁰Card, *The Unnatural Lottery*, p. 33.

²¹Ibid., p. 33.

²²Ibid., p. 42.

Ordinary acquisition of integrity, like the integration of a multiple . . . requires reconciling values, perceptions and commitments. It requires internal bonding—being committed to care for ourselves as well as respecting ourselves, distinguishing between friendly and hostile points of view on ourselves and within ourselves, recognizing the differences between being valued for ourselves and being valued only for what we are to others.²³

This task of acquiring integrity is necessary for resisting oppression and taking responsibility for—or being able to “stand behind”—whom one becomes, but it is a task that in turn requires discovering which of one’s character traits are constitutive of moral damage and should be forgone in favor of a disposition that consistently supports one’s own—and others’—flourishing. While there are both virtues and vices associated with social disadvantage (and likewise with social privilege), the special problem of figuring out how to resist oppression creates the question of how to change the vices that may prevent the oppressed from pursuing or enacting liberation. Card names some of these character traits:

Misplaced gratitude is one kind of moral damage women have suffered. There are others. . . . The oppressed are liable to low self-esteem, ingratiation, affiliation with abusers (for example so-called female masochism), as well as to a tendency to dissemble, fear of being conspicuous, and chameleoning—taking on the colors of our environment as protection against assault . . .²⁴

Someone who has these character traits and who meanwhile is committed to liberatory feminist principles through which she can identify these traits as bad (for her) will experience an internal conflict that Card would describe as a lack of integration.

Taking responsibility for oneself in a forward-looking sense will require being able to make of oneself a person one is willing to be accountable for, a person whose values, practices, and disposition one can support, as well as a person who is capable of caring for herself. Being a self whose desires are seriously at odds with one’s principles will complicate taking responsibility since one may not want to fully stand behind such a self. Learning how to *undo* the damage would enable one to unproblematically stand behind one’s self, but this may not be easy or even possible to learn. As Card asks, “how is it possible for us as damaged agents to liberate ourselves from the damage?”²⁵ and thus to become a self whose inclinations are not at war with deeply held convictions, a self one could thereby stand behind and more easily take full responsibility for becoming?

²³Ibid., p. 46.

²⁴Ibid., p. 53.

²⁵Ibid., p. 41.

Feminist Ethics as Action Ethics or Virtue Ethics

Card's question about liberation from moral damage needs to be taken seriously by feminist ethicists, whether in an attempt to answer it, or in an attempt to proceed beyond it by exploring how to engage ethically in a context in which one cannot liberate oneself from some moral damage. My sense is that an action-ethics approach tends to deflect attention away from Card's question, since the question is primarily about the *character* of the agent who may potentially resist oppression. I would like to suggest that rather than (or in addition to) using the idea of right action as a starting point for feminist ethics, and then, if at all, asking what sort of virtues are required for the actions, one might do well to ask questions focused on character and framed by a recognition of the moral damage done to character through systemic bad luck. If systemic bad luck impacts heavily on one's being able to take responsibility for whom one becomes, as Card suggests, then feminist ethical theory can only address this problem by focusing on character.

Within a virtue-centered framework, feminist ethics might do this along two paths of inquiry: along the first path will be questions about how to acquire the virtues that will be needed to not only consistently and dependably carry out the actions that feminist principles suggest are good ones, but to do so as a self with integrity; along the second path will be questions about how one takes responsibility for a self whose constitution is not fully in one's control and which one cannot necessarily "repair." The assumption behind this second path of inquiry is that since "*responsibilities outrun control*,"²⁶ one may be led to "stand behind" a self that one would not have *chosen* to be.

To have a sense of the limitations of an action-centered feminist ethics for pursuing these two paths of inquiry, consider as an example Alison Jaggar's account of what she calls the "minimum conditions of adequacy for any approach to ethics that purports to be feminist."²⁷ Jaggar's first condition, which is the only one on which I will focus here, is: "Within the present social context, in which women remain systematically subordinated, a feminist approach to ethics must offer a guide to action that will tend to subvert rather than reinforce this subordination."²⁸ What I would like to add to Jaggar's first condition is a requirement that a feminist approach to ethics problematize how an oppressed

²⁶Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency," p. 241 (emphasis in the original).

²⁷Alison Jaggar, "Feminist Ethics: Some Issues for the Nineties," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 20 (1989): 91-107, p. 91. A later version of these conditions appears in Alison Jaggar, "Feminist Ethics: Projects, Problems, Prospects," in Card (ed.), *Feminist Ethics*; however, the condition to which I refer is essentially unchanged.

²⁸Alison Jaggar, "Feminist Ethics: Some Issues for the Nineties," p. 91.

and morally damaged self is likely to arrive at the performance of correct action.²⁹ Within a virtue-ethics framework, it is, of course, not enough to perform the right action. As Aristotle says:

If the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.³⁰

Thus for instance, the fully virtuous man and the “continent” (strong-willed) man may perform the same actions, but they differ in character, the fully virtuous man having the right desires as well as the right principles, and the continent man having the wrong desires but following his principles to “override” the desires.³¹ Part of the problem of continence is that it is a painful state to maintain, since one feels pain at the thought of performing the right action, but does so nevertheless. The morally damaged agent described by Card—one who lacks an integration of desires and principles and is internally conflicted—is akin to Aristotle’s case of continence (or incontinence, depending on the outcome of the conflict between desires and principles), and in a similarly painful state; it is this psychic pain that is not taken into consideration by feminist ethical theories that prescribe actions based on feminist principles without attention to character.

It will be illustrative here to look at some actions that might be prescribed by feminists within an action-ethics framework and to consider what it might take to perform these actions, if one’s character has been formed under oppression. Suppose that among these prescribed actions are the following:³² within feminist organizations, make decisions using cooperative rather than hierarchical procedures, aiming at consensus; help undermine the power of misogynist and racist beauty-norms by re-

²⁹I am not claiming that Jaggar herself fails to problematize the way that someone’s emotional constitution relates to her principles, or to the actions she is led to perform; in fact, Jaggar addresses this issue extensively in “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology,” in Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989). Rather, I am pointing out that a feminist ethical theory that meets her criteria for adequacy (and here I have mentioned only the first of her conditions) by guiding feminists to correct action could do so without giving attention to the possible conflicts between disposition and principles.

³⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, from W.D. Ross (trans.), in Richard McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1105a28-34.

³¹*Ibid.*, 1152a1-4.

³²I do not intend this list to be exhaustive, nor that these actions stand as some sort of universal feminist prescriptions. They are meant to serve only as possible examples; other prescribed actions, including those diametrically opposed to the ones listed, might serve here just as well.

fusing to conform to these norms; engage only in those forms of sexuality that do not draw upon and reinforce a pornographic imagination; carry out organized resistance in the form of demonstrations, political education, or direct actions aimed at changing structural features of the society that are oppressive. What will it take for these actions to be carried out by one who has a competitive disposition, or by one who has internalized a body-aesthetic according to which an unadorned female and/or dark-skinned body is ugly and dirty, or by one who responds sexually only to images of domination, or by one who is excessively fearful and unassertive, lacking the courage and confidence to stand out, to risk disapproval, or risk being fired or arrested, or being abandoned by those upon whom she may depend to confirm her worthiness? It is quite probable that the prescribed actions either will be quite difficult (if not completely out of reach) for those whose characters have been damaged in the above ways, or that if the actions are possible, they are achieved through the compromise of continence. Then, even if the prescribed action is performed, the agent is faced with having to stand behind or take responsibility for the conflicted self who performs it. For instance, a feminist might steadfastly refuse to mark herself with the signs of femininity, simply enduring her own painful thought of herself as ugly in her lack of femininity, if she is unable to change the internalized misogynist aesthetic. Although she performs the "correct action" according to at least some feminist prescription for action, she is left conflicted and in this way barred from really flourishing. A prescription for action, then, ignores the need for a consideration of how the character of the agent who is to carry out the actions may interfere with the success of the project, where success will involve not only performing the action, but doing so in such a way that one is not pained by its performance. This sort of failure of a feminist ethico-political project will be particularly evident when the project is conceived as part of a politics of personal transformation, for in this case transformation of desires and thus of character is understood as intrinsic to the project.

In contrast to an action-centered approach, a virtue-centered approach to feminist ethico-politics will have a consideration of character built in. Let me suggest, then, an alternative to Jaggar's conditions for adequacy, by re-framing her conditions within a virtue-centered approach: Any adequate moral theory must promote human flourishing. An adequate *feminist* moral theory will pay particular attention to systemic barriers to human flourishing that have been created by conditions of oppression (including, but not limited to, the oppression of women). Since one cannot flourish as one whose inclinations are at odds with one's own liberatory ideals, an adequate feminist moral theory will have to either address the question of how to undo the moral damage that causes this con-

flicted state, or will have to acknowledge that not all moral damage can be reversed and instead consider what it means to engage ethically in a context in which one assumes that full virtue is unavailable. Since part of examining the systemic barriers to flourishing under oppression will involve looking at how moral damage is inflicted on and reinforced in the characters of those who are constituted under conditions of oppression, thereby preventing, or making more difficult, or making painful, the actions that are characteristic only of those who have not suffered such damage, it will involve asking questions about systemic, constitutive, intrinsic, bad moral luck.

The Politics of Personal Transformation

I am now in a position to ask whether the practices that can be described as part of the politics of personal transformation enable one to do what a virtue-centered framework suggests for feminist ethics, namely to examine the systemic barriers to human flourishing created by conditions of oppression, particularly those barriers that result from the morally damaged characters of the oppressed. At first glance it seems as if the politics of personal transformation has indeed presupposed a model of feminist ethics that fits within a virtue ethics rather than an action ethics framework. A feminist politics of personal transformation proceeds by first giving an account of flourishing and a corresponding set of virtues or character traits that will either enable one to resist oppression (since it is understood to interfere with flourishing) or to flourish as one would if one had already escaped oppression. It then suggests a transformation into a self that can dependably and without internal conflict enact such resistance or such flourishing. Thus, the politics of personal transformation avoids the problem of an action-centered approach, by recognizing that change in character is necessary for resisting oppression and for becoming a self for which one can unproblematically take moral responsibility.

However, while those engaged in the politics of personal transformation recognize the need for changing character, they tend not to recognize the complexity of carrying this out, particularly in the light of moral luck, which makes it clear that the transformation of character is not entirely within one's control. As Card points out, when one takes responsibility for the transformation of one's character, one cannot act as an autonomous agent whose actions result solely from her will. One cannot simply will one's character to change.

This point is central to Sandra Bartky's argument in "Feminine Masochism and the Politics of Personal Transformation," where she observes that the politics of personal transformation has tended to proceed

on the false assumption that feminist-oriented change in character is at least largely a product of the will, and that it can follow from feminist consciousness raising.³³ To illustrate this claim, Bartky explores the case of someone who suffers from what in Card's terms could be described as a lack of integrity, in this instance a lack of integration between desires and principles. Bartky begins with the question: "What to do . . . when the structure of desire is at war with one's principles?"³⁴ and tries to answer the question (or reveal it as unanswerable) by telling the story of a woman whom she names "P.," where P. is "a feminist, who has masochistic fantasies."³⁵ Her description of P.'s situation resonates with Card's account of a self who has been morally damaged and who becomes a "site of seriously warring inclinations, moods, likes, and dislikes elicited by the double-binds of oppressive institutions."³⁶ Bartky writes:

. . . a person may experience her own sexuality as arbitrary, hateful, and alien to the rest of her personality. Each of us is in pursuit of an inner integration and unity, a sense that the various aspects of the self form a harmonious whole. But when the parts of the self are at war with one another, a person may be said to suffer from self-estrangement. That part of P. which is compelled to produce sexually charged scenarios of humiliation is radically at odds with the P. who devotes much of her life to the struggle against oppression.³⁷

Not only is P. in this painful state of conflict and lack of integration, but her distress is augmented by the fact that she feels shame at being in such a state, at having desires that "are not worthy of her."³⁸ Given the state that P. is in, she is clearly motivated to change her character, or more specifically, her sexual desires. P. tries every possible avenue of change, with no success. Among the least helpful models for change is that presented by a feminist politics of personal transformation, which Bartky points out relies upon a voluntarist theory of sexuality. She writes:

The view is widespread among radical feminists . . . that female sexuality is malleable and diffuse and that a woman can, if she chooses, alter the structure of her desire . . . [This] sexual voluntarism has two sources; first, the fact that for many women, thoroughgoing and unforeseen personal changes, including the rejection of heterosexuality for lesbian sexuality, have often accompanied the development of a feminist politics; second, a theory of sexuality that relies heavily on Skinnerian-style behaviorism. While it is a fact that many women (and even some men) have been able to effect profound personal

³³Sandra Lee Bartky, "Feminine Masochism and the Politics of Personal Transformation," in *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁶Card, *The Unnatural Lottery*, p. 42.

³⁷Bartky, "Feminine Masochism," p. 51.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 52.

transformations under the influence of feminist ideas, a theory of sexuality I believe to be both false and politically divisive has taken this fact as evidence for the practicability of a willed transformation of self.³⁹

P. is unable to change her desires. What is she to do? It seems that her options are to be either strong-willed or weak-willed (continent or incontinent); if she is strong-willed, she will abide by her principles, repressing her sexual desires and refusing to indulge them, which may require foregoing sexual satisfaction altogether. If she is weak-willed she will indulge the desires, but feel the troublesome lack of integration of her desires and her principles, and the accompanying shame. While of course continence is usually taken to be superior to incontinence, it is really not clear that either option better enables flourishing for P.; both produce terribly painful psychic states. What is unavailable to P. as an option is full virtue, that is, having both the "correct" desires and the "correct" principles; this would require the transformation of desire that P. has discovered to be impossibly difficult, and that a feminist politics of personal transformation, with its voluntarist account of character change, has failed to enable.

Part of the failure of a feminist politics of personal transformation, then, is that it recognizes the need but not the difficulty, or even impossibility in some cases, of the transformation of character. According to the voluntarist account of character change employed by a politics of personal transformation, one would never experience a serious and unalterable conflict between desires and principles, for one could always simply choose to desire in accordance with one's principles, at most retraining oneself along a behavioral model. To allow moral luck a place is to necessarily reject this voluntarist account of agency in favor of the claim that although one is the morally relevant center of agency for one's own character, this does not imply that one can effectively will one's character to assume a particular shape. To repeat Williams's insight, "one's history as an agent is a web in which anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not."⁴⁰

Through its theoretical commitment to voluntarism, the politics of personal transformation is unable to admit the full extent of moral damage that can be done through systemic, constitutive, bad moral luck. When such luck is intrinsic to a project, as it always is in the case of a politics of personal transformation, the project must fail. As Bartky points out, the politics of personal transformation has not included a complex enough understanding of how oppression works in interfering

³⁹Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁰Williams, "Moral Luck," p. 29.

with flourishing. Bartky makes this point powerfully:

Those who claim that any woman can reprogram her consciousness if only she is sufficiently determined hold a shallow view of the nature of patriarchal oppression. Anything done can be undone, it is implied; nothing has been permanently damaged, nothing irretrievably lost. But this is tragically false. One of the evils of a system of oppression is that it may damage people in ways that cannot always be undone.⁴¹

While I would not suggest giving up on the possibility of creating the sorts of practices that might effectively change character when it interferes with living well or flourishing, Bartky does seem to be right in claiming that for now, feminism lacks "an effective political practice around issues of personal transformation."⁴² Not wanting to admit to this lack, feminists may continue to theorize as if the means of transformation were readily available. Even Card, who clearly is focused on the force of bad moral luck in the formation of a damaged character, seems to pass fairly easily into finding a solution for undoing moral damage and achieving integrity, implying only that under unfavorable conditions, the achievement of moral responsibility becomes *harder* and demands more conscious work. She writes:

Potentialities for becoming responsible may be realized without much self-consciousness in a moderately favorable environment . . . What develops without much self-consciousness under moderately favorable conditions may be stunted or damaged by oppression or abuse. The development of responsible agency then may require the deliberate construction of friendly space and a monitoring of what is permitted inside.⁴³

I believe, however, that this sketch of how character can be transformed cannot be taken to solve problems like the one that Bartky presents through the story of P. Instead of only trying to find a way *out* of situations in which full virtue is unavailable because desires cannot be brought into accord with beliefs about what constitutes flourishing, feminists will do well to also consider what a feminist ethics will look like *in* a context in which oppression is understood to interfere with flourishing. It is for this task that a feminist virtue ethics, framed in this way, has something to offer.

Anger, Regret, and Compassion: Virtues to Face the Bad Moral Luck of Oppression

Oppression can be seen as interfering with flourishing in two ways. The first and most obvious way is that it creates circumstances external to the

⁴¹Bartky, "Feminine Masochism," p. 58.

⁴²Ibid., p. 61.

⁴³Card, *The Unnatural Lottery*, p. 47.

oppressed agent (whether that agent be virtuous or not) that limit options so that every way one turns one runs into barriers that make it difficult or impossible to gain or be granted freedom, material resources, political power, and respect or social recognition of personhood—all of which are needed to live well. In response to this first way in which oppression interferes with flourishing, communities of resistance must fight for structural changes to remove the barriers, and indeed, these are the sorts of changes that (radical) resistance movements do focus on. While I certainly think that fighting for structural changes is of primary importance in the struggle against oppression, what I have focused on here is tied to the second way in which oppression interferes with flourishing, something that is less often attended to by communities of resistance, perhaps because it cannot be addressed solely through structural changes. The second way in which oppression interferes with flourishing is that it gives rise to moral damage in the oppressed agent, typically by creating inclinations that conflict with liberatory principles, thus barring the possibility of full virtue. Both of these ways in which oppression interferes with flourishing are forms of bad luck, in that both arise from something at least in part beyond the control of the agent; the first way could be described as systemic, incident luck, and the second as systemic, constitutive luck.

For Aristotle, bad incident luck does interfere with flourishing, but according to him, one may still morally evaluate someone in a context of bad luck; in fact, in such a context, one evaluates a person precisely by seeing how they *respond* to bad luck. In Aristotle's words:

Now many events happen by chance, and events differing in importance; small pieces of good fortune or of its opposite clearly do not weigh down the scales of life one way or the other, but a multitude of great events if they turn out well will make life happier (for not only are they themselves such as to add beauty to life, but the way a man deals with them may be noble and good), while if they turn out ill they crush and maim happiness; for they both bring pain with them and hinder many activities. Yet even in these nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul.⁴⁴

Although one cannot *fully* flourish unless one is "sufficiently equipped with external goods,"⁴⁵ one can still look for the virtues that survive bad luck and that aid one in living as well as possible under bad circumstances. I believe that this is true both in the case of bad incident luck and in the case of bad constitutive luck (assuming that the bad constitutive luck is not so destructive that no virtues have any chance of surviving); in both cases, one can ask what the disposition is that will best en-

⁴⁴Aristotle, *NE*, 1100b22-32.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 1101a15-16.

able flourishing *in the circumstances given*.⁴⁶ Aristotle suggests that one should consider someone to be good if he makes the best of what is given:

For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of life becoming and always makes the best of circumstances, as a good general makes the best military use of the army at his command and a good shoemaker makes the best shoes out of the hides that are given him.⁴⁷

It will be useful to know more specifically what enables one to make the best of given circumstances, and for the purposes of a feminist virtue ethics, to know what in particular are the virtues for surviving, resisting, and living as well as possible under the bad luck of oppression. Margaret Urban Walker suggests that there are virtues that are possible and necessary specifically for withstanding and responding to bad moral luck—to use Aristotle's metaphor, for making the best possible shoes out of rotten hides; she calls these "the virtues of impure agency," by which she means the virtues of the agent who has moral responsibility for things beyond her control. The virtues of impure agency are thus special virtues that arise within what Walker describes as "a distinctive field of assessments of ourselves and others, in terms of how we regard and respond to . . . [the] interplay between what we control and what befalls us." Within this field, she claims, "we expect ourselves and others to muster certain resources of character to meet the synergy of choice and fortune, which is especially burdensome in the case of bad moral luck."⁴⁸ While the virtues appropriate for responding to bad moral luck may include virtues that are also called for elsewhere, Walker finds that there are some virtues that the very context of bad luck creates the need for. She writes:

While acceptance of responsibility, whether in excess of control or not, will often prompt reparative attempts that enlist various of the familiar virtues—courage, justice, benevolence—bad moral luck taxes agents in distinctive ways to which the qualities [called virtues of impure agency] distinctively respond.⁴⁹

A feminist virtue ethics might consider, in light of the details of how

⁴⁶Aristotle does not consider this question in the case of bad constitutive luck, since he shies away from claiming that a morally bad character may be due to bad luck, maintaining instead, and in spite of his recognition that character formation begins in infancy (*NE*, 1103b24-26; 1104b11-12; 1105a1), that bad moral states are voluntarily incurred (though they may not always be voluntarily reversed, since they may, like the moral damage that Bartyk discusses, be irreparable). (See *NE*, 1114a12-22).

⁴⁷Aristotle, *NE*, 1100b35-1101a5.

⁴⁸Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency," p. 241.

⁴⁹*Ibid.* Walker suggests integrity, grace, and lucidity as some of the virtues of impure agency. I have chosen not to discuss these particular suggestions of hers (in part because she does not mean them to apply specifically to situations of oppression), but rather to just borrow her idea that there *are* special virtues for responding to bad luck.

oppression interferes with flourishing, the distinctive virtues that are called for in response to this phenomenon. While situations of non-systemic bad luck may just call for special virtues having to do with bearing or enduring the bad luck well, in the case of systemic bad luck—since the source of the bad luck can be identified and potentially altered through social or political action—the special virtues that are called for will also be those that help one to protest or even eliminate the systemic source of bad luck.

Let me suggest that anger,⁵⁰ regret, and compassion will be among the ways of responding that may be characterized as virtuous under the bad luck of oppression. Since luck creates agents who take responsibility for their characters and the results of their choices in the complex ways that acknowledge the mixture of control and lack of control, the best responses will be ones that reflect this complex taking of responsibility. The dual responses of anger and regret at the damage that systemic bad luck sustains registers a protest to this damage while recognizing both that others (other agents, or social systems) are responsible for it (thus the anger), and that oneself is responsible for it (thus the regret, or more precisely, what Williams calls “agent-regret”). To only feel anger would be to refuse the sort of complex responsibility that properly belongs to the impure agent. It is appropriate to feel regret, for instance, at having to enact options that one would not choose, but which, given the limited options typically available in oppressive circumstances, are the best one can do.⁵¹ As Rosalind Hursthouse notes, in situations where no good option is available, “[t]he just or compassionate agent does not act unjustly or callously, that is ‘as the unjust or callous one does’. She acts with immense regret and pain instead of indifferently, or gladly, as the unjust or callous agent acts.”⁵² That is, when the virtuous agent must engage in an act that she could not *choose*, she, unlike one who lacks the relevant virtues, is pained by having to perform the act.

To think about situations of severely limited options that oppression might give rise to, consider, for instance, being faced with the alterna-

⁵⁰Some feminist discussions of anger include Marilyn Frye, “A Note on Anger,” in *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1983); Naomi Scheman, “Anger and the Politics of Naming,” [1980], in *Engenderings: Constructions of Knowledge, Authority, and Privilege* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Elizabeth Victoria Spelman, “Anger and Insubordination” in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (eds.), *Women, Knowledge and Reality* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

⁵¹Compare this claim to Rawls’s belief that a rational plan of life is one that one cannot later regret having followed. In Rawls’s framework, one could never feel agent-regret for that over which one did not have complete control. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁵²Rosalind Hursthouse, “Applying Virtue Ethics,” in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 65.

tives of staying with a partner who is abusing one's children but who keeps one financially secure, or leaving and subjecting oneself and one's children to poverty. Or consider being the victim of an attempted rape and having the options of being raped or killing one's attacker in self defense. A mark of virtue, here, will be a capacity and a tendency to feel regret, in addition to anger, that one has to enact either option.

I think that the same sort of anger and regret that is appropriate in these cases of systemic, incident bad luck described above is also appropriate in the case of one who has experienced systemic, constitutive bad luck and has become morally damaged. Such anger and regret can be felt by someone who, while not fully virtuous precisely because she has been morally damaged by oppression, experiences this lack of virtue as not having been fully in her control, not chosen or willed. If her desires conflict with her principles, she cannot be said to be *choosing* her structure of desire. As illustrated by Bartky's case of P., P. would will her character to be otherwise if only character were solely a product of the will, but alas, it is not. It is beyond the control of the agent in a way similar to that in which the specific options for action were beyond the control of the virtuous agents who encountered bad incident luck. But in both cases, one may take responsibility in part by feeling agent-regret. Just as when one is dealt bad incident luck, the mark of having virtue is the feeling of both anger and regret at being unable to make a virtuous choice, so in the case of enduring bad constitutive luck, though one cannot be fully virtuous, the mark of still having those virtues that do escape damage will also be this mixture of anger and regret at not being able to be who one would choose to be.

I add compassion⁵³—towards oneself and others—as a third mark of virtue under oppression, in part because it seems to capture the disposition one must have in order to navigate the complexities of taking responsibility under conditions of bad moral luck. Compassion helps one to not assign *too* much responsibility (to oneself or others) when it is not deserved. It helps one to say, "this is the best I (or she, or he) can do under the circumstances of bad luck." That is, compassion expresses a recognition that there are many equally acceptable answers to the question "how ought one to live?" This question will have no *one* right answer as long as it is applied not to some imagined ideal circumstances but to the circumstances one finds oneself in, for when faced with no good choice, different virtuous agents may very well act differently. As Hursthouse points out:

It must be . . . a thesis in virtue ethics that two virtuous people cannot, in the same cir-

⁵³Thanks to Bat-Ami Bar On for suggesting the importance of compassion, in the context of a conversation that deceptively appeared unconnected to this paper.

cumstances, act differently, each thinking that what she does is right and what the other does is *wrong*. But to insist on that is a far cry from insisting that the two must always act as one. If they agree on what is good and evil in each choice, and believe that each is a choice of the good, though not of the best, it seems that they can, consistently with their virtue, act differently.⁵⁴

Taking responsibility and fully “standing behind” one’s own (or others’) imperfect characters and choices seems characteristic of those with compassion. To recognize this as a virtue under oppression may permit feminists greater room for moral disagreement with each other, without the condemnation that follows from denying a place to luck.⁵⁵

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⁵⁴Hursthouse, “Applying Virtue Ethics,” p. 63.

⁵⁵This paper was presented in May 1998 at the University of Göteborg, Sweden, by invitation from the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Feminist Studies, and at the Spring 1998 meeting of the Eastern Division of the Society for Women in Philosophy; I would like to thank members of the audience at these presentations for their responses. Special thanks to Bat-Ami Bar On for comments on drafts of this paper, from which I have benefited greatly.

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