

4

The Burdened Virtues of Political Resistance

Lisa Tessman

I

Liberatory movements must offer praise for those whose political resistance gives life to the movement, and from the patterns of such praise arises a portrait—intended to be admired—of the politically resistant self. Yet the moral praise heaped on politically resistant selves appears odd if one views it through the lens of a eudaimonistic ethics, such as a (neo-)Aristotelian virtue ethics, because in this framework one ordinarily expects character traits that are morally praiseworthy—the virtues—to be conducive to and largely constitutive of flourishing. However, it may frequently be the case that the actual character traits of the resister are not connected to the resister's own flourishing, at least not given the understanding of flourishing contained in the resister's (often unrealized) political goals. For those influenced by more Kantian assumptions this may seem unproblematic, for Kantians tend to associate moral praise with the fulfillment of those moral duties that are most difficult and taxing, and political resisters may score well in this regard: they sacrifice themselves or their own possibilities of flourishing.

Normally, Aristotelian virtues are not (self-)sacrificial: quite the opposite, they are sources of well-being for their bearer. An Aristotelian need not disqualify the traits of the politically resistant self from being virtues, however. Instead, it is possible to conceive of them as examples of what I call “burdened virtues” associated with resistance, namely traits that while practically necessitated for surviving oppression or morally necessitated for opposing it, are also costly to the selves who bear them. Their claim to being virtues at all derives from their value as means to the envisioned

goal of liberation (assuming—well beyond anything in Aristotle’s own schema—that this is a “noble” end). While the traits can be labeled virtues, the fact that conditions of oppression disrupt the usual pattern of an Aristotelian virtue and lead some of these traits to be burdens on their bearer must be disturbing if one is committed to some form of eudaimonism.

I will be exploring in this chapter some of the particular vulnerabilities of political resisters to having their virtues burdened or, put differently, to needing virtues that are unlinked from their own flourishing. The political resister may certainly be deserving of moral praise, precisely because she or he displays the traits needed for pursuing an end to oppression, which is what someday could enable—for all—a version of flourishing endorsed by the resister: human lives that are free from domination, from exploitation, from abuse, from war, from great deprivation. But these goals are likely to remain unattained, and the resister will be in a position of perpetual struggle, with a constant demand for the virtues of resistance. The struggle itself requires character traits that may strain if not wreck psychological health, and presumably such health is part of the good life imagined to follow an end to oppression; after all, oppression itself has been portrayed as psychologically harmful. Thus evaluated from the perspective of the account of flourishing implicit in the goals of liberatory movements, the traits of the politically resistant self will appear “unhealthy,” not the sort of traits that would be part of (or constitute) a flourishing life.

Exposing the politically resistant self as ailing would uncover a tension between feminist or other liberatory politics and a eudaimonistic ethics if one were to understand such an ethics crudely, as requiring praise only for those traits that help constitute their bearer’s flourishing. However, a revised eudaimonistic ethics could emphasize the contingency of the relationship between virtue and flourishing, taking account of the ways that traits may be understood as virtues despite the inability of the bearers of these traits to flourish. Aristotle himself—in his discussion of “mixed actions” (*Nicomachean Ethics* [NE], 1109b30–1111b3)—provides a way of understanding this troubling unlinking of virtue and flourishing. My suggestion is that resistance to oppression routinely involves a similar unlinking: When political resisters have virtuous characters, these characters are often, unfortunately, either unable to contribute to the resisters’ flourishing or themselves vulnerable to damage. I do not mean to suggest that one fares better, morally, by succumbing to oppression, but resistance, while politically necessary, does not automatically release the self from the burdens or the damages that oppressive conditions evoke. The moral praise due to the political resister must be accompanied by the recognition, and lament, that the virtues under oppression—even if they are associated with resistance—tend to be burdened virtues.

II

Victims of oppression face direct barriers to flourishing, no matter how successfully they are able to maintain the virtues. As Aristotle notes, deprivation of external goods can make it impossible to flourish (*NE* 1099a31–1099b8; 1101a14–16; 1153b14–21; *Rhetoric* 1360b20–30). When oppression results in the deprivation of the material conditions for living well or in devastating or traumatizing experiences, virtue will certainly be insufficient for securing the well-being of oppressed people. But apart from what arises from the deprivation of resources, there are additional, more subtle ways in which virtue, under bad conditions, may be disjoined from flourishing.

Luck—by which I mean anything outside the control of an agent—may bring to anyone situations that make it impossible to act well. Aristotle touches on this point in his discussion of voluntary actions and in particular when he focuses on actions that are in some way “mixed” in being voluntary, as in the case of “things that are done from fear of greater evils or for some noble object” (*NE* 1110a4–5). He gives two examples of such cases: one where a tyrant, holding one’s family hostage, orders one to do something base (this is a dirty hands case, namely a case of a moral dilemma from which one cannot emerge without committing an immoral act [Stocker 1990: chap. 3], and another where one throws goods overboard to save a sinking ship in a storm (Aristotle, *NE* 1110a5–11).¹ In both cases, the actions are such that they are chosen *given the circumstances* (and in this way are voluntary) but would never be chosen (at least by a virtuous agent) otherwise.

Aristotle’s mixed actions are important because they point to a way in which even a virtuous agent can be barred from flourishing, through the bad luck of encountering circumstances that force an action that otherwise would never have been chosen. Since flourishing is a certain sort of excellent activity (*NE* 1098a15–17), diverting the activity effectively disconnects a virtuous disposition from flourishing. Michael Stocker (1990) puts it as follows: “what makes mixed acts mixed has to do with how they stand to eudaimonia. They tell against eudaimonia, even though morally they must be done” (64).

Committing a base act when circumstances morally necessitate it is not the same as having a base character, and I do not mean to imply that what interferes with flourishing even in dirty hands cases is (necessarily) the depreciation of the character of the agent who commits the act. Indeed, if every engagement with evil forced by circumstances destroyed the virtues, then these cases would not reveal a disconnection between virtue and flourishing; they would be cases where both virtue and flourishing were destroyed. My point is precisely that these cases, in disuniting virtue and flourishing, evidence the burdened virtues; they show that there are virtues whose exercise is, due to bad (including unjust or oppressive) conditions, not conducive to or constitutive of their bearer’s flourishing.

Virtue and flourishing can be disconnected in several ways. The virtuous may encounter moral dilemmas that lead them to perform base actions or in any case actions that “tell against eudaimonia” (Stocker 1990:64). And they may have virtuous dispositions that, because of adverse circumstances, they are unable to express through activity. In either of these cases their virtues endure but these virtues are unable to help their bearers flourish. The virtuous may respond to these experiences with regret, sorrow, shame, guilt, remorse, or a loss of a sense of themselves as honorable.² If these responses or other effects of bad experiences are serious enough, they may be incorporated deleteriously into character, in which case one will want to say that not just the possibility of flourishing, but also excellent character itself, has been diminished. Thus, while bad conditions, including encounters with tragic dilemmas, sometimes interfere with flourishing without destroying the virtues, they may also or eventually have the effect of eroding good character.³

Martha Nussbaum has emphasized the vulnerability of virtue and of eudaimonia due to the risks incurred by virtue itself: virtue requires activity to be fulfilled and is dependent on luck to make this activity possible, and to also make possible various goods, including the relational goods (such as friendship) that rely quite heavily on what is outside of the agent’s own control.⁴ I am also interested in looking at the vulnerability of virtue and eudaimonia to bad luck, especially since while everyone is subject to luck (a point that is important to Nussbaum), some bad luck is also a result of injustice or of one’s engagement with injustice in the form of resistance to it. Some special vulnerabilities arise from this systemic type of bad luck. My question, then, is this: What are the particular vulnerabilities to the unlinking of virtue and flourishing that are faced by those who devote themselves to resistance to oppression?

The vulnerability of political resisters takes many forms. One that I will point to only briefly is due to the probability of encountering dirty hands cases rather regularly while doing the work of resistance.⁵ Knowing that they have committed “base” acts, even if they have done so only because they were caught in a dirty hands dilemma, resisters may be forever weighted down by their sense of responsibility for this. Their very goodness in part is revealed through their discomfort, sorrow, and remorse. Their virtues are, then, to use my language, burdened.

Political resisters thus face one vulnerability when they are led to commit certain *acts* because of unjust circumstances, just like in Aristotle’s case of doing what the tyrant orders to save one’s family. But another vulnerability arises from the pressure to develop certain *traits* that are called for only because they are the traits needed for facing—and fighting—injustice. The politics of resistance is not just a politics of action; resistance movements regularly develop prescriptions for what kind of a self a good comrade should be.

Some movements—such as the civil rights movement—have done so self-consciously and have based these prescriptions on two factors that were thought to coincide: First, what kind of selves are best suited to achieve the aims of the movement? Second, what kind of selves are morally commendable even apart from circumstances calling for resistance? Training political resisters through the discipline of nonviolence that was the cornerstone of the civil rights movement was believed by, for instance, Martin Luther King Jr. both to be the most effective means to the ends sought by the movement and to be the only morally praiseworthy approach to life. These two considerations were connected: King argued that effectiveness in achieving liberatory ends was dependent on bringing the oppressor to be ashamed of his injustices, and he maintained that through the resisters' displaying great moral integrity, white supremacists could be shamed into developing a moral conscience and consequently accepting the demands of the movement.⁶

Thus, some resistance movements have refused in a principled way to embrace acts or traits that create an inconsistency between their means and their ends: they reject those traits that, apart from the circumstances, would have no place in a flourishing life. Other movements have disagreed with the premise that the oppressor may be brought to moral conscience peacefully and have advocated a range of other tactics, including separation from the dominant group and armed resistance.

It is not my intent here to enter into—and certainly not to settle—the question of whether liberatory goals are best achieved through a commitment to nonviolence and its related virtues or through a readiness for violence; nor will I try to determine the relative efficacy of ending oppression through negotiation and communication with dominators—requiring virtues such as compassionate understanding—or through separation and a refusal to cooperate within existing structures—requiring a stance of oppositional anger or at least indifference toward the dominant group. Not settling these questions, I leave open the possibility that the more militant or more radical approaches are the most effective. I find this possibility to be plausible enough that it is worth analyzing the *moral* questions that arise in the face of radical resistance, questions that are separable from the now bracketed question of what may most effectively promote liberatory goals. These moral questions could arise out of various concerns: traits associated with an oppositional stance could, for instance, be morally condemned for failing to be sufficiently other-regarding and for supporting injustices against members of dominant groups that are the targets of militant opposition. But it is not concern for members of dominant groups that motivates or occupies me here. I am concerned instead with the resisters themselves and interested in revealing how the traits promoted by radical resistance movements may burden the bearers of these traits.

I will thus turn now to identifying traits that have been chosen and promoted by some resistance movements on the basis of their presumed effectiveness in achieving certain ends but that I find morally problematic in this specific respect: they are burdens to their bearer because they are disconnected from her or his own flourishing. My claim is that these traits—while prescribed because they are taken to be the traits that enable resisters to achieve the liberatory goals of the movement—may be “mixed traits” parallel to Aristotle’s “mixed actions.” That is, they may be traits that, apart from the terrible circumstances, would never be endorsed. And, apart from the circumstances, they would be thought to have no place in a flourishing life; in particular, they would be excluded from the account of flourishing implicit in the goals of a liberatory movement. For instance, if oppression is psychologically damaging and one of the aims of eradicating oppression is to relieve victims of this damage, then some conception of psychological health must be a part of the good life that resisters are struggling to enable. Thus, a trait that is psychologically harmful—though commendable because it enables successful resistance and thereby serves a “noble end”—must be seen as a “mixed trait.”

III

There is a certain sort of a self that one must try to fashion oneself into in order to be a radical or militant resister. I spent about a decade of my life trying to cultivate the politically resistant self—letting the idea of political resistance inform my every move—in the context of various communities that were self-consciously radical.⁷ While I do not regret this political engagement and remain committed to it in a modified way, it is worthwhile to reflect not only on what the value of it is but also on its costs.

Certainly not all of the traits that are valuable for resistance are suspect ones. For instance, becoming habituated not to feel socially sanctioned revulsion at despised groups (people with disabilities; gays, lesbians, transsexuals, and other “deviants”; people of color; etc.) but instead to feel proud (especially if the pride is self-referential) or celebratory or open can be described as a character trait that enables resistance to social exclusion and that does not meanwhile seem to undermine the possibility of one’s own or others’ flourishing. The cultivated disposition to not only refrain from but also to have no desire for the type of overconsumption promoted under capitalism is a form of resistance and meanwhile is probably (as long as it does not become a sort of extreme asceticism or self-denial) a mark of health and part of a capacity to live well. Integrity, sociality, sustained focus, creativity, visionary imagination, and perseverance may all be suggestive of dispositions that make resistance possible and that are also directly tied to flourishing. This list could con-

tinue, but my focus is elsewhere, on the traits that create a tension because while they enable resistance (and thus may further an eventual goal of flourishing for all), they disenable a good life for their bearers.

The worrisome traits marking the radical, politically resistant self fall loosely into three sets. The first set is composed of traits that contribute to developing and maintaining a hard resolve against the oppressors, which often entails encouraging or cultivating anger or rage in addition to withholding more sympathetic forms of attention. The second set includes those traits that lead some resisters to take risks courageously and/or to accept or even welcome personal loss and sacrifice as a part of their political work. The third set encompasses the character traits that resisters are expected to display in their relationships with one another: loyalty coupled with an openness to intense, politically motivated criticism and self-criticism. While all of these traits are burdened virtues if they are virtues at all, each of these sets of traits is generally admired in at least some resistance movements. For the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on analyzing anger, a central trait in the first of the three sets named earlier.⁸

IV

Anger at injustice or at the agents of injustice may come easily: psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs (1968) in their influential *Black Rage* asserted that “of all the things that need knowing, none is more important than that all blacks are angry” (4). Audre Lorde (1984b) conjectured that “every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful, against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being” (127). However, in many cases anger is hard to call up or even recognize, and an angry disposition is challenging to maintain. This is so not just because anger can be repressed but also because compassion—even for those who commit terrible abuses or injustices—may spring forth. I remember discovering how difficult it can be to harden oneself against sympathetic responses to an oppressor, a discovery that was tied to my reading for the first time Alexander Berkman’s account of his attempt to assassinate Henry Frick during the Homestead strike against Carnegie Steel in 1892. Upon reading the details of the attempted assassination, I chastised myself for involuntarily cringing in pain—as a sympathetic response on behalf of Frick, who was injured but not killed and whose fear, as described by Berkman, made me want to comfort rather than attack him—a response that, at the time, I believed diminished my capacity to act as a true resister, for Frick was clearly one of the “bad guys.”⁹ Apparently, Berkman himself had to work rather hard to maintain the character traits that led him to experience righteous anger rather than pain and shame at the thought of shooting Frick. He writes of facing the bleeding

Frick: “For an instant a strange feeling, as of shame, comes over me; but the next moment I am filled with anger at the sentiment, so unworthy of a revolutionist. With defiant hatred I look him full in the face” (1970:38–39). I now think that Berkman’s moment of shame—and my moment of sympathy for Frick—were actually quite interesting and worthy moments in which we revealed that, despite the pressures to conform to the ideal of a political resister, something survived of the character traits that enable not resistance but what would be the flourishing of interdependent human lives if one could imagine this taking place in the absence of great oppression. My own self-critical reflections on my sympathetic response to Frick’s fear and pain came not because I supported political assassinations or any variety of political violence—I never did—but because my sense of even milder (but still radical) strategies of resistance was that they required anger, hatred, or at least a withholding of attention toward the oppressors;¹⁰ certainly compassion for one’s oppressors seemed inappropriate. I may have been right about this: resistance may be enabled or at least facilitated by a resolutely unsympathetic attitude toward the oppressors; this has been the consensus of some radical liberatory struggles including the Black power movement and the more radical and separatist branches of second wave feminism (while precisely the opposite approach animated the civil rights movement).

It is worth looking at accounts of this stance—I will continue to focus here specifically on anger—offered by its (theoretical) proponents. There is a thread of feminist writing on the topic. Audre Lorde spoke in 1981 of the importance of anger to feminist struggle for responding to racism, including importantly the racism poisoning the interactions between women. She takes the presence of anger as a fact: “My response to racism is anger” (1984b:124), leaving only the question of whether one silences or expresses one’s own anger (she points out the deep harm that comes from silence), and how one responds to the justified anger of others (she cautions against defensiveness and guilt). Her claim that anger is a source of strength and a positive motivating and clarifying force in struggles against oppression serves to counter the charge that anger is either useless or destructive: “Focused with precision it [anger] can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (127).

Some feminists have embraced women’s anger as a way of reclaiming what has been off-limits according to the norms of (especially white) femininity and as a way of refusing the subordinate status of women assumed by these norms. Consider, for instance, Marilyn Frye’s 1983 “Note on Anger,” included in a book in which she argues for a feminist/lesbian separatism. She points out that when one is angry one “claims that one is in certain ways and dimensions *respectable*” (90). Given sexist understandings of women’s place, Frye argues, men give women’s anger the right sort of uptake only when it is anger in defense of a justified aspect of womanhood (as mother, nurturer,

helpmate, even as a public champion of moral causes connected to caretaking). But a woman's anger on her own behalf—about her own competence, rights, autonomy, interests—is seen as crazy precisely because the woman is seen as insanely outside of the bounds of her own proper, subordinate, place. Thus, “others’ concepts of us are revealed by the limits of the intelligibility of our anger” (93).

A similar theme is echoed by Elizabeth Spelman in her 1989 essay “Anger and Insubordination”:

To be angry at [someone who can be blamed for doing something he should not have] is to make myself . . . his judge—to have, and to express, a standard against which I assess his conduct. If he is in other ways regarded as my superior, when I get angry at him I at least on that occasion am regarding him as no more and no less than my equal. (266)

Anger on the part of those who are in subordinate positions, then, signals a recognition of the wrongness of the subordination, and a refusal to accept it: “the systematic denial of anger can be seen as a mechanism of subordination, and the existence and expression of anger as an act of insubordination” (Spelman 1999:270). Assuming the Aristotelian understanding that emotions such as anger can be informed and guided by beliefs and are potentially trainable, Spelman considers whether anger should be purposefully cultivated as a response to oppression: perhaps there is a moral ought to anger and the oppressed *should* be angry. Her qualifications, here, have to do with weighing this imperative for anger against its possible risks. For instance, one might be punished for it, or one might find it unbearable to engage in the mere act of noticing how much injustice there is at which to be angry (271–72). Additionally—and drawing again on Aristotle—Spelman worries that anger may not be carried out properly, since it can occur to the wrong degree, be directed at the wrong target, stem from the wrong motive, and so on (I will return to this worry later).¹¹

In accord with these sorts of feminist insights on anger, women's consciousness-raising groups regularly helped women identify and then become angry about the systemic nature of their mistreatment.¹² Even outside the context of consciousness-raising groups (which have become quite rare), feminist anger can become a motivation for activism or for more spontaneous acts of defense against one's own or others' subordination. For example, women learning self-defense techniques and strategies are often still taught—by feminist martial arts and self-defense practitioners who raise consciousness about male violence against women—to draw on their anger to fuel their physical fighting.

Additionally, feminists have seen positive epistemic value in anger. Lorde (1984b) writes that “anger is loaded with information and energy” (127). Diana Tietjens Meyers (1997) unpacks this sort of claim by arguing that what

she calls “heterodox moral perception” can be aided by a chronically angry (or otherwise “rancorous”) emotional attitude. According to Meyers, approaching the world with a rancorous emotional attitude as opposed to a more genial or “nice” one enables one to feel what one is not expected or permitted to under dominant values, what Alison Jaggar (1989) has called “outlaw emotions.” Meyers writes that “when people have become hypersensitive, paranoid, angry or bitter as a result of being subjected to a devastating injustice (or series of injustices) or to disabling systemic oppression, they become preternaturally sensitive to unjust practices and oppressive conditions” (209). While not arguing that people ought to *become* chronically angry or otherwise rancorous in order to enhance their ability to discover injustice, Meyers points out that since “it is a fact that rancorous individuals already exist,” oppositional groups should pay attention to them and benefit from their insights (213).

I want to complicate this generally positive appraisal of oppositional anger by adopting some Aristotelian analysis of it and by juxtaposing the Aristotelian (descriptive and prescriptive) account of anger with the conditions presented by oppression. Aristotle’s descriptive account of anger as the response to being wronged is compatible with feminist assumptions about anger (though, of course, Aristotle would disagree with feminists about what constitutes a wrong and about who can wrong whom). Anger, for Aristotle, is a feeling of pain at being unjustifiably harmed by another, especially if one is harmed by being slighted—that is, denied the respect that one deserves; and, this pain is mixed with pleasure at the thought of revenge (*Rhetoric*, Book II, chaps. 2–3).¹³ One can only be slighted by—and therefore one only becomes angry at—someone from whom one expects respect, and “a man expects to be specially respected by his inferiors in birth, in capacity, in goodness, and generally in anything in which he is much their superior” (*Rhetoric* 1378b35–1379a2). While rejecting this last remark, feminists would nevertheless agree (as both Frye and Spelman have emphasized) that becoming angry with someone marks oneself as the person’s equal, as someone to be respected as a moral agent.

Aristotle’s prescriptive account of anger, however, presents difficulties for those trying to cultivate proper anger in the context of oppression. The prescription follows the same pattern as most other virtues: to be morally praised, a man must be angry “at the right things and with the right people, and further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought” (*NE* 1125b32–33). Only the moderate state of good-temperedness is praised; the excess of anger is condemned as irascibility, but the deficiency (inirascibility) is also morally troubling, for

those who are not angry at the things they should be are thought to be fools,
and so are those who are not angry in the right way, at the right time, or with

the right persons; for such a man is thought not to feel things nor to be pained by them, and, since he does not get angry, he is thought unlikely to defend himself; and to endure being insulted and put up with insult to one's friends is slavish. (*NE* 1126a3–8)

I am especially concerned with two ways in which—under an Aristotelian account—the angers of political resistance may go wrong: such anger might be mistargeted, or it might be excessive in degree. The first error—hitting the wrong target—I think must be cautioned against, and I believe that political resisters must indeed train their angers carefully so that this failure is minimized. But the second of these potential failures of anger—that anger might be felt too much or too strongly by political resisters—is quite complicated under conditions of great systemic injustice. It can be confusing to evaluate anger of enormous proportions, for under conditions of unrelenting injustice, such anger can be characterized (surprisingly) as a deficiency even as it appears as an excess; there may be no moderate state that allows one to be angry all the times one ought to be. This suggests not a warning to resisters to train their anger into a moderate level but rather a critique of the call for moderation. At the same time, however, ignoring the desirability of moderation in anger allows one to also ignore how the resister is burdened by the imperative to carry an awesome level of anger.

The problem of anger hitting the wrong target is described in detail by Lorde (1984a), in the second of her essays on anger, “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger.” In contrast with “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” which concerns the anger that women of color feel toward white women and in which Lorde characterizes the anger as correctly targeted, cleanly distinguishable from hatred, and constructive in instigating change, Lorde’s examination of anger in the second essay focuses on the anger—and hate—that Black women misdirect at one another. Lorde reports both that her anger is constant and potent (“My Black woman’s anger is a molten pond at the core of me. . . . My life as a powerful feeling woman is laced through with this net of rage”) and that “how to train that anger with accuracy rather than deny it” is a pressing question because despite her knowledge that “other Black women are not the root cause nor the source of that pool of anger,” the anger does “unleash itself most tellingly against another Black woman at the least excuse” (145). Analyzing her own tendency to misdirect her anger, Lorde points to the internalization of oppression, the development of self-hate that comes from growing up as a member of a socially despised group. She describes the childhood experience of finding herself inexplicably but repeatedly treated as an object of hate and concluding that there must be something wrong with herself, then expanding the target of this hatred beyond herself to include other Black women, “for each of us bears the face that hatred seeks”

(146). This hate-infused anger causes significant harm in a way that the clean anger directed at a proper target does not. Psychologically complicating the misdirected anger even further, Lorde explores the fact that it is easier to be angry than to hurt, so her anger at other Black women covers up the pain of unfulfilled desire for another Black woman's unconditional love, a yearning to replace the loving Black mother whose image is tied to a (mythologized) Black or African sisterhood. This unconditionally loving mother—while perhaps an object of desire generally—is, according to Lorde, especially crucial for Black women, who have depended on and trusted only their own mothers in the face of a hostile world.¹⁴ Thus under these particular conditions of oppression—where one internalizes a hatefulness toward one's self and others like one, and where one desperately needs unconditional love as protection from a cruel and unjust society—it is all too easy to aim one's anger at others subject to the same mistreatments as one's self is and for this anger to be a messy, hateful one.

Consider, also, that anger at those who are more powerful may be quite dangerous, and as a result, others who are as vulnerable or more vulnerable than oneself may be the only available targets for anger. As bell hooks (1995b) explains: "We learned when we were very little that black people could die from feeling rage and expressing it to the wrong white folks. We learned to choke down our rage. . . . Rage was reserved for life at home—for one another" (13–14).

Not only are there multiple reasons for anger to be misdirected under oppression, but the fact that oppressions interlock makes it difficult to even identify and isolate a proper target for politically resistant anger; many people are both the agents and the victims of oppression, thus both proper and improper targets for anger. Lorde's portrait of the anger that women of color direct toward white women represents that anger as unbelievably clean, as if it could escape being tainted with the contempt for (white) women that women of color, along with everyone else, absorb from society. More drastically, the anger of some male Black nationalists against whites has manifested itself as a misogynist and often sadistic targeting of white women.¹⁵

Learning not to misdirect anger under oppression is a daunting task, since it requires a high degree of recovery from the effects of internalized oppression, the courage to be angry at those whose retaliation may be backed by great force, and an ability to separate out the ways someone may be implicated as an agent or beneficiary of one form of oppression even while subject to another. Politically resistant anger, then, will have trouble hitting the right target: those responsible for perpetrating injustice. Nevertheless, as hard as it may be to target anger well, anger that fails in its targeting is not to be praised; there is no temptation to praise it, though, because it is not even helpful as an oppositional force in the service of liberatory politics.

While training one's anger to hit the right target is imperative for political resistance, another Aristotelian requirement for proper anger—that it occur in a moderate proportion—cannot necessarily be recommended for resisting oppression. Resistance might be radicalized—particularly by developing a separatist dimension—when anger is permitted to take on huge proportions; this is what is suggested by María Lugones (1995) in “Hard-to-Handle Anger.”¹⁶ Lugones compares what she calls first-level and second-level anger. *First-level* anger is the sort of anger that Frye and Spelman captured in their accounts of anger used by subordinated peoples to communicate their refusal to accept subordination and their demand of respect for themselves as moral agents. But because it has “communicative intent,” Lugones argues, such anger must try for respectability within the “world of sense” belonging to the dominator, because it is, in part, an attempt to get uptake from those who have denied one respect. Since “rage is equated by dominators with hysteria or insanity” and would therefore have no possibility of getting the desired uptake, first-level anger must, to be communicative, be measured or moderate as opposed to excessive and raging; thus Lugones interprets Spelman's acceptance of Aristotle's endorsement of the mean regarding anger to stem from the fact that “rage cannot express, in a justifiable manner, a judgment addressed to those who have wronged one” (210). But instead of rejecting rage as Spelman does, Lugones rejects the assumption that resistant anger ought to aim at being communicative with the dominator. She proposes instead *second-level* anger, anger that becomes fury or rage and is hard to handle or control, that “places one beyond the pale” (206). These awesome, second-level angers

presuppose worlds of sense against which the anger constitutes an indictment or a rebellion, worlds of sense from which one needs to separate. These angers also presuppose or establish a need for or begin to speak from within separate worlds of sense. Separate, that is, from worlds of sense that deny intelligibility to the anger. (204)

This is separatist anger whose very refusal to be toned down or moderate is key to its radical potential and its capacity to generate change. In part, its potential is in the possibilities of opening up new worlds of sense in which to be creative, instead of being limited to making only backward-looking claims focused on redressing wrongs already committed.

Even from within Aristotle's own account of anger, one could infer that resisting oppression requires enormous anger. Aristotle asserts that one displays a moral defect if one becomes angry so little that one “endure[s] being insulted and . . . put[s] up with insults to one's friends” (*NE* 1126a7–8). But for instance, people of color may be subjected to racist insults and degradation daily, and under such conditions, the “proper” level of anger for people of color (or their friends/political allies) becomes, relative to the

anger appropriate to those who do not regularly encounter insults, extreme. If one believes (correctly) in one's own moral worth while others in the society—in dominant positions—do not believe in it, one will constantly find oneself “slighted” (to use Aristotle's term); the frequent or unabating nature of this slighting is a condition that makes the right level of anger a tremendous level, the level of fury or rage.

According to Aristotle, a mean is always to be calculated relative to particular circumstances. Constructing an analogy to the procedure for calculating how much food one should consume, Aristotle says, “If ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds; for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little—too little for Milo [a wrestler], too much for the beginner in athletic exercises” (*NE* 1106a36–1106b3). Thus, just as it is appropriate for Milo (or, as Aristotle did not think to say, any pregnant/lactating woman) to eat huge quantities of food, so it is appropriate and praiseworthy for those who are constantly subjected to “slights” (to understate it) stemming from systemic mistreatments to become hugely, furiously angry. Since this impressive level of anger is actually the mean relative to the circumstances, it is the virtuous, morally praiseworthy level of anger.

However, there is something like a “moral remainder” (Williams 1973) to solving the problem this way: While being intensely or chronically angry may be morally right or the best option in the circumstances, there is something that is to be regretted about it. While Milo presumably is able to metabolize his super-sized meals—so that the food is actually *good* for his health—it is far from likely that raging political resisters can metabolize their anger. Instead, I would contend, they themselves suffer from the level of anger prescribed for them, even if such a high level best serves their oppositional struggles. When anger at oppression is defended, it is applauded in comparison to a worse state: for instance, the acceptance of subservience or perhaps the depression that follows from unrecognized anger.¹⁷ But being the best state that is possible in the circumstances does not make an angry disposition ultimately praiseworthy; it would unlikely be a part of the good life that liberatory movements are trying to enable.

If tremendous anger is ultimately unhealthy or corrosive for its bearer, then the political resister with an angry disposition displays an example of what I have been calling a burdened virtue: a morally praiseworthy trait that is at the same time bad for its bearer, disconnected from its bearer's well-being. The resister to oppression faces a dilemma that challenges or burdens the virtues like the dilemmas resulting in Aristotle's mixed actions: If one chooses to be angered only in a measured way, then one must endure the degradation of one's self or of others on whose behalf one acts; but if one chooses to develop a fully angered/enraged disposition in response to the vast injustice one is fighting, then the anger can become consuming. This dilemma did not

occur to Aristotle presumably because he did not consider the possibility that someone who actually deserves respect would be a regular victim of systemic harm; he assumed the opportunities for appropriate anger would be infrequent and unpatterned.

V

Acknowledging the problematic nature of some of the character traits promoted in communities of resistance is discouraging, because it reveals the distance between what is possible under oppression and what one would hope to be possible in a different world. Under conditions of oppression, the politically resistant self may be the healthiest self possible—compare it, for example, to a fully victimized self, burdened with something completely different, such as an internalized sense of inferiority—but this comparison demonstrates only that the resistant self is not the *worst* possibility. The resistant self, I contend, is still in some trouble.

A more optimistic line of reasoning—one that depicts the resistant self as escaping the burdens of oppression—is employed in many liberatory struggles. The reasoning seems to go something like this: Acceptance of one's own unjust subordination is psychologically unhealthy and undermines the possibility of flourishing, and resistance to oppression is the opposite of its acceptance; thus, it must be the case that resistance to oppression is psychologically healthy and promotes flourishing. What is missed by this (fallacious) line of reasoning is any basis for thinking about the character traits associated with resistance as burdens. For instance, bell hooks (1995b) employs reasoning of this sort when she argues for the value of Black rage, including an extreme version that she identifies as “killing rage.” Rightly noting that rage can be tapped to motivate courageous, militant resistance to racism, and also accurately pointing to the suppression of anger as an unhealthy response—though sometimes a practical survival tactic—under white supremacy, she concludes that rage must be not only useful for resistance but also a sign of psychological health and healing. hooks insists upon portraying rage as healthy because she wants her writing to counteract a dominant understanding in which the image of Black people (especially males) as angry and violent has been distorted, pathologized, and demonized by whites. However, hooks conflates the diagnosis of rage as pathological—or any critical view of rage—with a prescription against rage.¹⁸ They need not be conflated; in my analysis of anger earlier in this chapter, for instance, while I describe rage as potentially psychologically harmful, I argue that rage could still be considered a virtue (just a burdened one), and I do not prescribe against rage.¹⁹ In fact, I am willing to endorse it in cases where it truly has radical potential. But the endorsement must be

accompanied by regrets, primarily regrets about what the anger does to its bearer (but also worries about what the angry self may do to others). Labeling someone in a constant or frequently recurring state of anger as flourishing would be a mistake; I have suggested that such a person should be seen instead as burdened with the necessity of such a high level of anger. Thus, I caution against the tendency—which some communities of resistance seem tempted by—to imagine an escape into psychological health (if not full flourishing) by way of a commitment to being thoroughlygoingly formed by a politics of resistance.

Resistance to oppression is clearly morally praiseworthy: it evidences a commitment to justice and a willingness to act on that commitment. But while a resister may be guided by this commitment to choose as well as possible when facing the moral dilemmas presented by oppressive conditions, even the best choices under terrible circumstances are morally problematic. I am suggesting that some of the problems are manifested on the self of the resister, and that a liberatory politics needs to be accompanied by a critical examination of what happens to the self that resists. One should worry about who one becomes as one carries out what begins as a noble commitment to justice, for the traits that are needed to actualize that commitment may be ugly ones, arising as they do out of such troubled conditions. I am reframing the old question about the necessity of consistency between means and ends; this version of the question asks whether one employs acceptable means if the character of the resister is damaged badly as it is fashioned for struggle, developing “mixed traits” that are unlinked from flourishing. I take it that since the alternatives to resisting oppression are unacceptable, the real issue here is not whether to resist but how to resist, and I am suggesting that the “how” should take into consideration the way the character of the resister is affected. There should be no glory in resistance to injustice, just a sad and regretful recognition of its necessity.

NOTES

Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the 2002 Radical Philosophy Association conference and at the 2003 Feminist Ethics and Social Theory conference, and I have benefited from the responses of both audiences. I would also like to thank the members of the Binghamton University Philosophy Department’s junior faculty discussion group—Christopher Knapp, Steven Scalet, and Melissa Zinkin—for carefully reading and discussing a draft of this essay. Thanks, also, to Bat-Ami Bar On for comments on multiple drafts. Barbara Andrew and Lisa Schwartzman provided excellent editing advice.

1. There are other cases where one should rather die than be “forced” to perform an act, such as the case of Euripides’ Alcmæon slaying his mother (*NE* 1110a25–28).

2. Several theorists have argued that these “negative emotions” are appropriate responses that the virtuous agent has to dirtying his/her hands. See Williams (1973, 1981a); Stocker (1990, chap. 1, section 8); Walzer (1973); Hursthouse (1999, chaps. 2 and 3); and Bishop (1987).

3. See Martha Nussbaum’s (1986) comment on a passage in the *Rhetoric* (1389b13–1390a23), which she thinks demonstrates “to what extent Aristotle is willing to acknowledge that circumstances in life can impede character itself, making even acquired virtues difficult to retain” (338). Nussbaum claims that the excellence of the virtuous person must

find its completion or full expression in activity; and this activity takes the agent to the world, in such a way that he or she becomes vulnerable to reversals. . . . The vulnerability of the good person is not unlimited . . . but the vulnerability is real; and if deprivation and diminution are severe or prolonged enough, this person can be “dislodged” from *eudaimonia* itself. . . . Aristotle’s final point . . . is that even then virtuous condition is not, itself, something hard and invulnerable. Its yielding and open posture towards the world gives it the fragility, as well as the beauty, of a plant. (340)

4. On the relational goods, see Nussbaum (1986, chap. 12).

5. The role of dirty hands in a revolutionary movement is treated in Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *Dirty Hands* (1948), and a similar theme is taken up by Michael Walzer (1973), who shifts the focus from revolutionaries to ordinary (but “good”) politicians, who are also led into dirty hands dilemmas and whose goodness as politicians depends on both their willingness to dirty their hands (when it is necessary, as it frequently is, to achieve their praiseworthy goals) and their feelings of guilt at doing so.

6. This sort of argument permeates many of Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches and writings. See, for instance, *Why We Can’t Wait* (1963) (especially chap. 2, “The Sword That Heals”); many of the pieces collected in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World* (Washington 1986), such as “The Time for Freedom Has Come” (1961) (where he claims that nonviolence “offers a unique weapon which, without firing a single bullet, disarms the adversary. It exposes his moral defenses, weakens his morale, and at the same time works on his conscience” [79]); “I Have a Dream” (1963) and “A Long, Long Way to Go” (1965) in *Ripples of Hope* (Gottheimer 2003); see also “Black Power Defined” (1967) in *I Have a Dream*.

7. These included different feminist and lesbian (some separatist) communities, a popular education project focused primarily on creating radical political movement among U.S. Latinos/as and Chicanos/as, a (communalist-)anarchist direct action group, and many informal networks and ad hoc groups active on the left.

8. In chapters 5 and 6 of my forthcoming book, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (Oxford University Press, 2005), I develop an analysis of the other sets of problematic traits, focusing on courage as the central trait of the second set and loyalty as an important part of the second set.

9. See Alexander Berkman (1970):

I step into the office on the left, and find myself facing Frick. . . . “Fr—,” I begin. The look of terror on his face strikes me speechless. It is the dread of the conscious presence of death. “He understands,” it flashes through my mind. With a quick motion I draw the revolver. As I raise the weapon, I see Frick clutch with both hands the arm of the chair, and

attempt to rise. . . . With a look of horror he quickly averts his face, as I pull the trigger. . . . I hear a sharp, piercing cry, and see Frick on his knees, his head against the arm of the chair. (37)

10. Marilyn Frye (1983) argues that reorienting one's attention away from "phallocratic reality" and toward women is an important form of resistance that lesbians engage in: "the maintenance of phallocratic reality requires that the attention of women be focused on men and men's projects . . . and that attention not be focused on women. . . . Woman-loving, as a spontaneous and habitual orientation of attention is then, both directly and indirectly, inimical to the maintenance of that reality" (172).

11. Spelman (1999) further theorizes about anger in "Anger."

12. Naomi Scheman (1993) argues that the political insights and analyses offered in the context of consciousness-raising groups actually enable an expansion or change in what counts as anger; they do not just enable the woman to *identify* what was previously unidentified, but still existing, anger.

13. Or, as Aristotle offers in an offhand definition, *anger* is "pain with a consciousness of being slighted" (*Topics* 151a15). See also the definitions of anger that Aristotle thinks would be produced by, on the one hand, a physicist (who emphasizes the material manifestations of it: "a boiling of the blood or warm substance surrounding the heart") and, on the other hand, a dialectician (who refers to its form—"the appetite for returning pain for pain"—while ignoring the embodiment required for actual anger to exist) (*De Anima*, 403a26–403b4).

14. Lorde (1984a) writes: "All mothers see their daughters leaving. Black mothers see it happening as a sacrifice through the veil of hatred hung like sheets of lava in the pathway before their daughters. All daughters see their mothers leaving. Black girls see it happening through a veil of threatened isolation no fire of trusting pierces" (158).

15. For an extreme example, see Cleaver (1968).

16. See Bernadette Hartfield's (1995) response to Lugones's article, which adds a compelling childhood example of "anger compounded." "Hard-to-Handle Anger" has been reprinted in Lugones (2003). See also Angela Bolte (1998), who distinguishes between anger and rage (differently than Lugones does), and defends the role that rage can play for those facing great injustice: "Where anger can point toward an injustice, rage can point toward an injustice of much greater magnitude" (48).

17. While seeing anger or rage as connected to pathologies in Black people, Grier and Cobbs (1968) also describe Black rage as a sign of health in comparison to the widespread and profound depression that is caused by oppression: "As grief lifts and the sufferer moves toward health, the hatred he had turned on himself is redirected toward his tormentors, and the fury of his attack on the one who caused him pain is in direct proportion to the depth of his grief. When the mourner lashes out in anger, it is a relief to those who love him, for they know he has now returned to health" (209–10).

18. In some ways, hooks's position is surprising since she has emphasized the importance of acknowledging and attending to the psychological woundedness of Black people under oppression (see hooks 1993, 1995a). However, it seems that she sees only the repression of anger, and not the experience of anger or rage (even if it is intense or constant), as psychologically debilitating.

19. The fact that one ought not conflate “action guidance” and “action assessment” has been emphasized by Hursthouse (1999), who points out that the two may “come apart” in the case of dilemmas that are resolvable only with a remainder. Action guidance is what one provides when, in the face of a dilemma, one decides “one should do x ” or declares “do x ”; engaging in action assessment allows one, alongside the decision to “do x ,” to assess the action x to be a bad action, one that does not contribute to or constitute any part of a flourishing life. While action guidance is concerned only with right decision, action assessment is also connected to the concept of a good or flourishing life (Hursthouse 1999:74). Thus, it is sometimes appropriate for action guidance and action assessment to come apart from each other, leading one in certain dilemmatic situations to both correctly choose an action, and assess it as bad. Drawing on Hursthouse’s account, I would like to make a parallel claim about what one might call “trait guidance” and “trait assessment,” where in dilemmatic situations such as those presented by conditions of oppression these two will not always line up with one another. That is, one may provide trait guidance in deciding that trait y should be developed or maintained (thus, one might say, “Be y ” or “Be a y person”; for instance, “Be enraged,” or “Be a chronically furious person” in the face of unrelenting injustice) but at the same time evaluate or assess y as a bad (or not fully good) trait in the sense that it interferes with one’s own flourishing. This is what I have done with respect to anger, a trait that under conditions of oppression may generate this incongruity between “trait guidance” and “trait assessment.” Thus, I have argued both that one may correctly decide to maintain a chronically angry disposition, and that anger may not be a trait that it is (unproblematically) good to have. However, instead of simply designating the trait as “bad” and disqualifying it from being a virtue at all, I have pointed out that it may still be considered a virtue (because of its connection to a struggle to create conditions under which all may eventually flourish, and thus to a “noble” end), but a burdened one.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle. *De Anima*. 1984. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- . *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1984. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- . *Rhetoric*. 1984. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- . *Topics*. 1984. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Berkman, Alexander. 1970. *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. Pittsburgh: Frontier.
- Bishop, Sharon. 1987. “Connections and Guilt.” *Hypatia* 2, no. 1: 7–23.
- Bolte, Angela. 1998. “The Outcast Outlaw: Incorporating Rage into an Account of the Emotions.” *American Philosophical Association Newsletters: Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 98, no. 1: 46–48.
- Cleaver, Eldridge. 1968. *Soul on Ice*. New York: Dell.

- Frye, Marilyn. 1983. *The Politics of Reality*. Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing.
- Gottheimer, Josh, ed. 2003. *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.
- Grier, William, and Price Cobbs. 1968. *Black Rage*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hartfield, Bernadette. 1995. "A Response to Maria Lugones's 'Hard-to-Handle Anger.'" In *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, ed. Linda Bell and David Blumenfeld. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- hooks, bell. 1993. *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*. Boston: South End.
- . 1995a. "Healing Our Wounds." In *Killing Rage*. New York: Holt.
- . 1995b. "Killing Rage." In *Killing Rage*. New York: Holt.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 1999. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. 1963. *Why We Can't Wait*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984a. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger." In *Sister Outsider*. Freedom, Calif.: Crossing.
- . 1984b. *Sister Outsider*. Freedom, Calif.: Crossing.
- Lugones, María. 1995. "Hard-to-Handle Anger." In *Overcoming Sexism and Racism*, ed. Linda Bell and David Blumenfeld. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- . 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Meyers, Diana Tietjens. 1997. "Emotion and Heterodox Moral Perception: An Essay in Moral Social Psychology," in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1986. *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1948. "Dirty Hands." In *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. L. Abel. New York: Knopf.
- Scheman, Naomi. 1993. "Anger and the Politics of Naming." In *Engenderings: Constructions of Knowledge, Authority, and Privilege*. New York: Routledge.
- Spelman, Elizabeth. 1999. "Anger." In *Wicked Pleasures*, ed. Robert Solomon. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Stocker, Michael. 1990. *Plural and Conflicting Values*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tessman, Lisa. Forthcoming 2005. *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Walzer, Michael. 1973. "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2, no. 2: 160–80.
- Washington, James Melvin, ed. 1986. *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Williams, Bernard. 1973. "Ethical Consistency." In *Problems of the Self*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1981a. "Conflicts of Values." In *Moral Luck*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1981b. "Moral Luck." In *Moral Luck*. New York: Cambridge University Press.