STUDIES IN FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY
Cheshire Calhoun, *Series Editor*

Published in the Series
Gender in the Mirror: Confounding Imagery
Diana Tietjens Meyers

Autonomy, Gender, Politics
Marilyn Friedman

Setting the Moral Compass: Essays by Women Philosophers
Edited by Cheshire Calhoun

Woman and Citizenship
Edited by Marilyn Friedman

Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles
Lisa Tessman

Burdened Virtues

Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles

LISA TESSMAN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2005

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Tessman, Lisa, 1966–
Burdened virtues : virtue ethics for liberatory struggles / Lisa Tessman
p. cm.—(Studies in feminist philosophy)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13 978-0-19-517914-9; 978-0-19-517915-6 (pbk.)
ISBN 0-19-517914-5; 0-19-517915-3 (pbk.)
1. Virtues. 2. Ethics. 3. Women—Conduct of life. 4. Feminist ethics.
5. Oppression (Psychology) I. Title. II. Series.
BJ1531.T27 2005
179'.9—dc22 2004059975

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For Ami and Yuval

2

The Damage of Moral Damage

I

Within any eudaimonistic theory that is concerned with the possibilities for human flourishing and with the role of the virtues in contributing to or constituting such flourishing, the fact that someone has been morally damaged will be of grave importance, for moral damage interferes with flourishing. In the previous chapter I relied upon the concept of moral damage, emphasizing the role of bad systemic luck in inflicting this damage and the consequent vulnerability of the oppressed to being damaged and arguing that because of the difficulties of overcoming moral damage, there is a need for moral theory that ponders the situations of those who must carry on within the bounds of some moral limitations.

It is time to raise some complications. To begin with, it seems that—to the extent to which one can distinguish between beneficiaries and victims of oppression at all—it is primarily the people occupying dominant rather than subordinate positions in systems of oppression who should be understood as morally damaged; after all, the character traits that allow one to actively dominate others, or even to be passively satisfied with benefiting unfairly from overprivilege, could accurately be described as character flaws or vices. I believe that in fact both beneficiaries and victims of oppression (and all those who occupy the ambiguous social positions created from a field of intersecting oppressions) are morally damaged and thus prevented in this way from what could truly be called a flourishing life, but I will wait until the next chapter to explore how those tending in the direction of dominant positions may be said to fail at flourishing.

I am concerned here with a second complication: those whose aim is to oppose the injustice indicated by moral damage in the oppressed do so against a background in which this damage has already been scrutinized, for conservatives have long been not only proclaiming the moral deficiencies of the oppressed but also using the alleged fact of the existence of such deficiencies for pernicious ends; most notably, moral damage in the oppressed has been utilized as a way of "blaming the victim." Given this history, portraying a group as

flawed exposes that group to the political and social danger that the shortcomings will be used against them, as evidence of an inherent or at least permanent or semipermanent inferiority.

When analyzing the problems that face an oppressed people, it is essential to avoid the mistake of characterizing those people *as* the problem, a thought that is captured in W. E. B. Du Bois's repeated posing of the question: "How does it feel to be a problem?" (1969 [1903], 43). Following Du Bois, Lewis Gordon remarks, "[W]e must study even dehumanized human subjects in a humanistic way in order to recognize the dehumanizing practices that besiege them" (1999, 24). While it is indeed my aim here to theorize about dehumanization without *engaging* in dehumanization, it may not be enough to have good intentions. Even when one's goal is to identify the systemic sources of moral damage and even when one emphasizes that finding moral damage in the oppressed only serves to further demonstrate the injustices of oppression, in a context of entrenched prejudices one's words can easily be transformed into precisely what Du Bois meant to caution against: turning those who suffer from a problem into the problem itself. Any liberatory project of exposing moral damage thus runs a risk of misinterpretation and misuse. And yet, simply denying damage—perhaps even taking "vices" of the oppressed and glorifying them as virtues[1]—can be problematic, too. Hence, despite the strategic dangers of exposing moral damage in various oppressed groups, I am unwilling to relinquish the project. Nevertheless, if the project of revealing and examining the moral damage of oppressed people is so dangerous, those who—like myself—insist on its importance had better have both some pretty good reasons for persisting in the project and some decent idea of how to avoid the likely pitfalls.

II

I will begin by giving an initial sense of why the concept of moral damage may be useful for understanding and resisting oppression (despite its appearance of reinforcing oppression by blaming the victim), by seeing how the concept suggests revisions to a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics framework that links moral excellence with human flourishing. I believe that creating a revised or critical virtue ethics through the addition of the idea of moral damage can help to explain one of the less-obvious ways in which oppression interferes with flourishing.

1. I would not argue that it is never useful to perform this transvaluation, only that one should not do so in a way that makes one unable to ever treat damage as damage. Douglas Glasgow, for instance, performs what might be a useful transvaluation. Using the term "survival culture" to describe the so-called black underclass in positive terms, he argues that the character traits of this culture should be considered virtues given their utility in the situation. He writes, "[N]otwithstanding its reactive origin, survival culture is not a passive adaptation to encapsulation but a very active—at times devious, innovative, and extremely resistive—response to rejection and destruction. It is useful and necessary to young Blacks in their present situation" (1980, 25). These traits may qualify as what I will later call "burdened virtues."

For Aristotle, certain "external" goods are necessary for flourishing (*NE* 1099a31–1099b8, 1101a14–16, 1153b14–21; *Rhet.* 1360b20–30),[2] but he envisions these goods or the lack thereof as resulting from accidental or natural events, such as being born of high or low status, having friends or children who die, or encountering misfortunes in old age that ruin one's prosperity. Having an analysis of oppression as a structural phenomenon requires seeing social or systemic forces as responsible for the fact that members of some social groups are deprived of these external resources. Hence it requires expanding Aristotle's list of the things that typically interfere with flourishing to include those things that regularly, and in a patterned way, arise as barriers to flourishing under conditions of oppression. Since oppressions vary widely depending on the social, political, and economic differences at play, the list may expand in a variety of directions. It must include, for instance, lack of access to resources that are distributed unfairly in an oppressive system, such as housing, education, health care, or, more generally, income and especially wealth. There are also resources that are not the sorts of things that can be captured under what Iris Young calls the "distributive paradigm" (1990, chap. 1), for some of the forces of oppression and domination cannot be remedied simply by instituting a fairer system of distribution. Young points out, for instance, that different oppressed groups may experience their oppression in quite different forms: they may be exploited, marginalized, made powerless, subjected to cultural imperialism, and/or targeted for violence (1990, chap. 2). All of these could be described as ways in which oppression creates external conditions that prevent flourishing. Adverse external conditions are probably the most readily visible and forceful obstacles to flourishing.

Despite Aristotle's crucial acknowledgment that certain external conditions must obtain for a person to flourish, his primary focus is on a consideration of the features of character that enable flourishing. Since, for him the "human good [is] activity of soul in conformity with excellence" (*NE* 1098a16–17), it is only the virtuous/excellent man who attains this good. That is, Aristotle links moral excellence with living the good life; one cannot be said to have reached *eudaimonia* without a virtuous character.

It is difficult, at first glance, to see how the claim that one must be virtuous to attain the good life will be helpful for understanding any additional way (besides the deprivation of external goods) in which oppression interferes with flourishing. Instead, the claim seems to place the blame on oppressed people themselves for being unable to flourish: the inability is attributed to their own lack of virtue. The linking of virtue to flourishing, then, seems to directly summon a chorus of victim-blaming in which one hears that, for instance, women are overly emotional, blacks are prone to violence, Jews are stingy, the poor lack self-discipline, and so on, and that these vices are what bring on the particular hardships faced by members of these groups.

2. Not all virtue ethicists agree with Aristotle's position on this; Socrates and the Stoics present virtue as sufficient for flourishing.

This is where it is useful to turn to the concept of moral damage, the concept that I utilized in chapter 1 and that emphasizes the role of systemic bad luck in shaping the characters of members of subordinated groups. That is, in order to make progressive use of the linking of virtue to flourishing, one needs to assert that the underdevelopment of the virtues can itself have structural or systemic sources rather than, for instance, sources in what is inherent, biologically given, or simply accidental. There is injustice already at work in the formation of character; the fact that something is based on character does not imply that it is not also rooted in an oppressive social system.

Aristotle lacks any way of seeing that the social and political positioning of people such that they have unequal chances for developing the virtues is itself an injustice. Clearly, for him, some people do have a better chance of being virtuous than others; to begin with, one must be a citizen male and must have the sort of leisure time necessary for practicing the virtues, and all of this can take place only within a correctly constituted and good *polis*, and even then, one does not fully develop all virtues unless one is ruling and thereby able to develop the virtues associated exclusively with ruling (*Pol.* bk. II, chaps. 4–5). But there is, for Aristotle, no injustice in this inegalitarian state of affairs where some are better positioned than others for becoming virtuous; as long as all those who are equals are treated equally, it is perfectly just that unequals be treated unequally and given unequal opportunities for developing the virtues (*Pol.* 1280a11–13).

The concept of moral damage can potentially fill in this gap in Aristotelian theory by emphasizing not only that people are unequally situated for becoming virtuous, but also that there is injustice in this arrangement. This is exactly what is argued by Claudia Card who, rejecting the Kantian assumption that "the same basic character development is accessible to everyone" (Card 1996, 4), observes that "different combinations of circumstances . . . provide opportunities for, stimulate, nurture, or discourage the development of different virtues and vices, strengths and weaknesses of character" (1996, ix).

Moral damage bears a relationship to what has commonly been understood as the "psychic damage" suffered by the oppressed. There is a fairly long history in the United States of blacks being portrayed (and in some cases portraying themselves) as psychically damaged, a history that I will discuss at more length in the next section. Additionally, beginning early in the second wave of the women's liberation movement, feminists have described women's "psychological oppression."[3] One way in which psychic damage comes about is from the internalization of oppression; the oppressed may come to believe about themselves, for instance, that it is their own inferiority that accounts for their

3. One of the sections in Robin Morgan's (1970) collection *Sisterhood Is Powerful* is thus entitled "The Invisible Woman: Psychological and Sexual Repression"; Sandra Bartky's "On Psychological Oppression" (in Bartky 1990, but originally published in 1979) draws parallels between the psychological oppression of women and what Frantz Fanon refers to as the "psychic alienation of the black man" (Fanon 1967, 12; quoted in Bartky 1990, 22).

subordinate position. As Sandra Bartky writes, "[T]he psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors; they come to exercise harsh dominion over their own self-esteem" (1990, 22). When conceived as an internalization of external messages or forces, the psychic states characteristic of the psychologically oppressed are clearly a product of systemic—social, political, and economic—phenomena, though they certainly may be perceived as having their origins in internal, even biological, deficiencies. Indeed, psychological oppression helps to keep the oppressed subordinated in part by obscuring the systemic sources of their troublesome psychological traits, thus making the oppressed appear, even to themselves, as responsible for their own condition.

The sense that one is responsible for one's own damaged state—and even for one's own subordination since some kinds of damage help to keep one subordinated—is only compounded when one is described not only as *psychologically* damaged but also as *morally* damaged. Even while it might be clear that someone or something else is responsible for inflicting psychic pain on me (that is, that it is beyond my control and thus a matter of luck to me), if I am described as having *character* flaws, it seems that it is I who am morally responsible for my deficiency, not to mention for any reprehensible actions that proceed from my flawed character. This may be connected to the fact that, as Bernard Williams has argued, the "morality system" (primarily deontology)—as distinguished from ethics more generally—has focused heavily on the concept of moral obligation and on assigning moral blame for failures to fulfill such an obligation. Leaving no room for luck, such a system can only see the violation of moral obligations as voluntary (and reprehensible) acts of the will. A moral deficiency in this system is necessarily blameworthy (Williams 1985, chap. 10). In a virtue ethics framework, there need not be this separation of the psychological (which is clearly subject to luck) and the moral.[4] In pointing to a psychic—or moral—trait as damaged, one need not emphasize the issue of responsibility for the trait, but rather one can inquire about the tendency of the trait to hinder its bearer's well-being. Any psychological trait that can be labeled "damage" will in fact count as a moral trait, that is, a character trait, precisely because in calling it a form of damage one is making a normative judgment about it, in this case a negative judgment, based on the trait's tendency to interfere with flourishing. So while some psychological traits may be morally neutral, a damaged psyche represents a lack of a virtue (if not the presence of a vice), a lack of a trait that could help one toward flourishing. For instance, all of the following are possible forms of both psychic and moral damage: a tendency to feel guilt or resignation instead of anger when one is wronged, a disposition to feel persistent hopelessness, a habit of manipulating or lying to others, a lack of self-confidence.

A virtue ethics framework, in connecting living a good life with moral excellence, will count psychic damage that interferes with flourishing as moral damage. However, when this shift from characterizing the oppressed as

4. Or rather "ethical," if one employs Williams's distinction between morality and ethics (see Williams 1985, chap. 1).

psychically hurt or damaged to characterizing them as morally damaged takes place in a context shaped by a system of morality that is focused on responsibility and blame and that evaluates actions as if they issued from an unconditioned will, disturbing questions of moral responsibility will arise, and the victims of oppression will be saddled with blame. The concept of constitutive moral luck ought to help remove this blame, for if moral damage can be seen to result from luck, then it will be understood to be beyond an agent's own control despite the fact that it affects the agent in a morally relevant way. Characterizing the moral damage of the oppressed as a product of bad, constitutive, systemic moral luck—as I did in chapter 1—is meant to convey the notion of a different, more-complex relationship of responsibility for that damage. This characterization of moral damage implicates oppressive systems as the sources of the bad, constitutive moral luck that adversely affects the characters of the oppressed, but it also does not deny that the person who is morally damaged in this way retains moral responsibility for herself, despite her lack of complete control in the formation of her own character.

This complex sense of having and not having moral responsibility for one's own character allows the oppressed person to preserve moral agency by retaining moral responsibility, and yet it does not blame the oppressed agent in a way that would simultaneously excuse all systemic or oppressive forces from responsibility. For example, consider a case of rape, which is a prime site for victim-blaming: many girls and women have been socialized to have character traits that potentially contribute to their vulnerability to rape, traits such as passivity, fear of fighting back, and lack of clarity and/or a sense of legitimacy about their own sexual desires.[5] If a woman chooses a strategy of submitting to an attempted rape rather than taking what she perceives to be the risks of resisting it, she will typically be blamed for the rape. The most obvious rebuttal here is that the rapist is the one responsible for the rape (and, of course, one could talk about the rapist as a morally damaged person). But there is also a second point to be made: one can implicate the gender system that contributed to the woman's vulnerability by affecting the formation of her character into someone who is afraid or unable to fight back, that is, into someone who is in this specific way morally damaged.[6] One can recognize the moral wrongdoing of an oppressive system for being the source of moral damage without portraying the morally damaged, oppressed person as lacking in agency just because she lacks complete control over the constitution of her character. The woman is still morally responsible for her own character and her own choice, for as the concept of moral luck implies, we can be moral agents responsible for some things over which we do not have control.

Nevertheless, even if it is possible to make *conceptual* sense of why a morally damaged character in an oppressed person should not be taken as evidence that

5. On this last point, see Tolman and Higgins 1996.

6. See Snow 1994 for a discussion of whether and when rape victims may appropriately be blamed or blame themselves. Snow characterizes the self-blame of rape victims as a case of agent-regret, though oddly, since she removes the concept of agent-regret from the context of luck.

the oppressed are to blame for their own oppression, in fact, historically, images of psychic and moral damage in the oppressed have been taken and continue to be taken in exactly this way, thus making it strategically risky to try to explore psychic or moral damage for liberatory purposes. A review of a piece of this history will be helpful here, so I will devote the next section to this, beginning with Daryl Michael Scott's historical account of the "image of the damaged black psyche," which presents a clear-cut case of damage imagery being used to the detriment of an oppressed group.[7]

III

Scott's *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* chronicles the changing historical contexts in which damage imagery has been employed by social scientists studying and reporting on black Americans. He contends that despite the association of the use of damage imagery with conservatives and blatant racists, such imagery has actually been used by both racial liberals and conservatives, often at cross-purposes. He argues, however, that this entire range of uses of damage imagery should be regarded with suspicion: "I believe that depicting black folk as pathological has not served the community's best interest. Again and again, contempt has proven to be the flip side of pity. And through it all, biological and cultural notions of black inferiority have lived on, worsening the plight of black people" (1997, xviii).

Scott's focus is on *psychic* damage, for his thesis is that in the late nineteenth century, "as personality replaced moral character as the key to success" (1997, xiii) and psychological well-being surfaced as an issue worthy of attention, it became possible to conceive of a person as being wronged by being hurt psychologically. As this "therapeutic ethos" increased in strength even more after World War II, humanitarian concern grew for the psychological health of subordinate groups. Scott explains, "[L]iberals used damage imagery to play upon the sympathies of the white middle-class. Oppression was wrong, liberals suggested, because it damaged personalities, and changes had to be made to protect and promote the well-being of African Americans" (1997, xiii). This liberal use of damage imagery played a primary role in, for instance, the argument against segregation used in *Brown v. Board of Education*, in which Chief Justice Earl Warren opined that "segregated children suffered damage to their psyches that made an equal education impossible" (1997, 135). However, argues Scott, the liberal use of damage imagery depends upon evoking pity, an emotion that presupposes one's own superiority to the object of pity:

> Liberals proceeded as if most white Americans would have been willing to grant black people equal rights and services only if they were made to appear

7. See also Walker 1998 (123–125) for a feminist argument against portraying the oppressed as morally damaged.

> psychologically damaged and granted a special status as victims. In so doing, they militated against their efforts to eliminate white supremacy. As they assaulted its manifestations in the law, they reinforced the belief system that made whites feel superior in the first place. (1997, xiii)

While the pity of white liberals presents a significant drawback to employing damage imagery for bringing about policy change, a further problem emerged when liberals split around the question of what sorts of changes were needed to address the damage. By the late 1950s social scientists theorizing about the "underclass"—a term introduced by Gunnar Myrdal (1944) to refer to an economic, and not a specifically racial, group—were divided into the "pathologists," who focused on curing individual pathological responses to poverty, and the "structuralists," who insisted that fundamental changes in social, economic, and political institutions would effectively end the phenomenon of psychic damage (Scott 1997, chap. 8). While for a time it seemed that these two schools advocated changes that were at least compatible with each other, their incompatibility emerged with Oscar Lewis's (1961) introduction of the "culture of poverty" theory, according to which the poor developed a pathological culture that was passed down through the generations and became self-sustaining (Scott 1997, 142). Whereas pathologists had previously been able to see institutional changes as helpful for addressing individuals' suffering, the culture-of-poverty theory suggested that since the pathology would perpetuate itself regardless of changes in social structure, such changes would be misguided. As Stephen Steinberg has noted, for advocates of the culture-of-poverty thesis, "the aim of social policy becomes one of reforming the poor rather than changing society. That is, instead of instituting the sweeping changes that could redistribute income, the focus of social policy becomes indoctrinating the poor with middle-class values" (Steinberg 1981, 109). This conservative side of the pathologists' position alarmed the structuralists, who at that point "recognized that notions of severe damage, particularly permanent damage, cast doubt on the efficacy or desirability of state intervention" (Scott 1997, 143).

As the term *underclass* became more and more automatically understood to refer to a *black* underclass, and as it became clearer that portraying this underclass as pathological would fuel the conservative claim that blacks had no one but themselves to blame for their plight and therefore had no basis for claiming special treatment, reparations, or assistance from social programs, it became strategically more dangerous to attempt to use damage imagery to bring about progressive, antiracist change. Nevertheless, in 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in his *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (otherwise known as the Moynihan Report) tried to support a plan of action—to be initiated by President Lyndon Johnson as preferential treatment programs—by relying on damage imagery. However, he made the same assumption as Lewis had in his culture-of-poverty theory, namely, that the pathological condition of blacks was being perpetuated by blacks themselves and would continue regardless of structural changes. Although Moynihan conceded that "not every instance of social pathology afflicting the Negro community can be traced to the weakness of family structure," he did argue:

> Nonetheless, at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or anti-social behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation. (Moynihan 1965, 30)

Moynihan contended that it was because of bad character formation in black families that there existed within the black community high rates of crime and delinquency, welfare dependency, unemployment, poor academic achievement, and in turn, more "unstable"—which largely meant "female-headed"—black families.

Moynihan recognized that white racism was originally responsible for creating the situation that blacks were in and even attributed the development of the black family structure to injustices perpetrated by whites under slavery and reconstruction; however, he did not believe that white racism had a significant role in perpetuating the situation of inequality. All responsibility for that had been shifted to blacks themselves. Thus Moynihan concluded: "Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American. At this point, the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world" (1965, 47).

Although it was probably not Moynihan's intention, the content of the Moynihan Report served as perfect evidence to bolster the conservative, racist image of blacks as inferior, an image that was used, for instance, to explain the behavior of blacks in the 1965 Watts riot. Scott points out that "released at the moment of the riots, the Moynihan Report was viewed by conservatives as an expression of their own views on black social and personal pathology" (1997, 157). That is, damage imagery, intended by liberals to support antiracist measures and improve the condition of blacks, had quite the opposite effect. Furthermore, even if it had not been coopted for straightforwardly conservative purposes, it still would have retained a paternalistic edge. As Scott puts it: "The racial liberals who sought to manipulate the paternalistic tendencies of whites may not have been racists and the dupes of racists, but many were all too willing to exchange black dignity for something other than justice, for social policies that reinforced white America's age-old belief in black inferiority" (1997, 185). Thus, in the wake of the Moynihan Report, there arose a near-consensus on the Left to avoid all damage imagery and to condemn its use as racist.

The dangers of trying to utilize damage imagery in liberatory projects have only intensified since the 1960s, because more recently neoconservatives have reinvigorated such imagery and put it to use in their attacks on affirmative action and, more generally, in their arguments against government or social responsibility for improving the conditions that many blacks face. Governmental programs aimed at helping blacks are, they claim, the primary source of the new damaged black psyche; according to them, preferential treatment is actually causing, rather than ameliorating, psychic problems, such as low self-esteem, and is actually giving rise to character deficiencies, such as "criminality" and "dependency" (Scott 1997, chap. 10). Some neoconservatives point to what they see as the failures of governmental aid programs as evidence that insufficient

attention has been given to what they see as the root of the problem: character flaws. Glenn Loury, for instance, laments the fact that other blacks do not share his own conviction that Moynihan had been right all along; Loury complains that thirty years after the Moynihan Report, "to invoke such terms as 'values,' 'character,' or 'social pathology' in speaking about the poor (black or otherwise) is still to invite the charge of blaming the victim or, if the speaker is black, of being an Uncle Tom" (Loury 1995, 258). Loury even goes on to express his disapproval of the fact that Moynihan himself has retreated from his former position and is no longer willing to condemn female-headed households or to show sufficient respect for "old-fashioned virtues" (Loury 1995, 260).

Neoconservative talk of "family values," along with the rise of other segments of the right wing, such as the religious Right, have shifted the language used in the discourse on damage. Scott focuses on the image of *psychic* damage because during much of the twentieth century concern with damage was represented primarily as an issue of psychological health; however, there is now a movement back toward an explicit focus on character and moral virtue. Unfortunately, because a focus on character is almost entirely associated with the right wing and because that discourse consists principally of a defamation of the characters of people of color, gays and lesbians, women, and poor people, it is extremely hard to imagine a critical or liberatory application of an analysis of character. Moving beyond Scott's analysis to a focus on the right-wing discourse on character reveals the perils of this discourse.

James Wilson, a neoconservative political scientist and policy advisor, provides in his 1991 book, *On Character*, a particularly clear example of this neoconservative discourse on character. In his schema, social problems are attributed to individual character deficiencies, and these character deficiencies are racialized. Wilson's thesis is that "a variety of public problems can only be understood—and perhaps addressed—if they are seen as arising out of a defect in character formation" (1991, 11). The public policy questions that he sees as most tied to character include crime and welfare. His primary focus is on crime, and he identifies "a persistent and wanton proclivity to criminality" as that which "almost any of us would regard as a defect in character" (1991, 5).[8] Criminality, he believes, results from the absence of what he considers to be the most important aspects of good character, namely, empathy and self-control, arguing that almost no criminals have both empathy and self-control. Since Wilson assumes that character formation depends upon what takes place within the family, the question of how to reduce crime becomes, for Wilson, the question of how "a government [might] remake bad families into good ones" (1991, 21), where presumably those families that do

8. Wilson defines criminality itself as a character trait; he takes criminality to be

> not an occasional violation of the law but a persistent and high rate of participation in illegal or disorderly actions. Criminality in this sense refers to a personality disposition—a character trait—that makes some people less likely than others to resist the temptations presented by criminal opportunities, less likely because they are impulsive or self-centered. (1991, 43)

not adequately teach self-control and empathy are the bad families. Wilson advocates the development of experimental programs aimed at improving how families instill proper values in children, commenting, "[I]f we discover that these ideas can be made to work on a large scale . . . then we will be able to reduce crime by, in effect, improving character" (1991, 21).

Welfare dependence can also be explained, according to Wilson, as a matter of character deficiency: those on welfare have the wrong values and therefore do not feel appropriate shame at the dependence itself nor at the actions—such as having children out of wedlock—that may have led to it. Wilson's argument here is that changing incentives in the welfare system has changed people's behavior and their character for the worse; thus, the task at hand will be to investigate a "way of using either obligations or incentives to alter character so that people who once thought it good to sire or bear illegitimate children will now think it wrong" (1991, 17).

While Wilson argues that there has been a moral decline in the United States in general ever since, as he puts it, an "ethos of self-control" began to be replaced by "an ethos of self-expression" (1991, 28), not surprisingly he remarks that "Black Americans have been especially vulnerable" (1991, 35) to this degenerate ethos. While he concedes that some of this vulnerability can be attributed to what he calls "exclusion from economic life" and thus from respectability, the primary problem according to him is to be found in what he perceives to be a defective black culture. He writes:

> The folk culture of urban blacks . . . was and is aggressive, individualistic, and admiring of semiritualistic insults, sly tricksters, and masculine display. This popular culture may have been a reaction against the repressive and emasculating aspects of slavery; whatever its origin, it was not a culture productive of a moral capital off which people could live when facing either adversity or affluence. (1991, 36)

Perhaps even more disturbing than Wilson's explicit claim that black Americans have culturally acquired defective characters—a blatant reiteration of the culture-of-poverty theory—is the fact that in the current political climate, he actually has no need to make this explicit reference to blacks in a discussion of either crime or welfare; both are code words with so thoroughly racialized meanings that a discourse on the degenerate character of criminals or welfare recipients functions as a masquerade for a more directly racist—and less socially acceptable—discourse in which blacks get directly cited as the prime example of a morally deficient population. In the context of a racist society in which blacks are stereotypically associated with both crime and welfare, a complicated racial project actually takes place through a color-blind discourse purportedly about crime reduction or about welfare reform. In the course of this project, an image of "the criminal" and "the welfare recipient" as morally degenerate characters is formed, and the vices of these characters are associated with blacks in general (particularly, black men in the case of crime and black women in the case of welfare), who already stand as the stereotypical criminal and welfare recipient. Both the criminal and the welfare

recipient embody socially despised characteristics, characteristics that are attributed not just to specific, actual people who commit crimes or who receive public assistance, and not even just to "criminals" and "welfare recipients" in some generalized way, but rather to *blacks* in this generalized way, for in the imagination shaped by this racialized discourse, blacks stand in for both the (generalized) criminal and the (generalized) welfare recipient. Public fear (in the case of crime) and resentment (in the case of welfare) are generated toward these morally degenerate characters and thus toward blacks in general. Finally, public policy that addresses that fear and resentment seems reasonable and justified; if it involves harsh treatment of the criminal or the welfare recipient, such treatment is justified since it was brought on by those characters' own moral degeneracy and furthermore is necessary to protect the upstanding members of society against violence or against having to support the undeserving with their own hard-earned money.

Angela Davis, for instance, points out that "crime," and thus "the figure of the 'criminal'—the racialized figure of the criminal—has come to represent the most menacing enemy of 'American Society'" (1997, 270), thus justifying what amounts to disregard for the lives of those whom the figure signifies. Since the figure of "the criminal" is taken as a character type—and "criminality" as a vice—any empirically grounded correlation of a specific racial group with high rates of crime is taken to reflect solely on the character traits—perhaps culturally acquired—of that racial group, not on the many ways in which the continued forces of structural racism set up targeted racial groups for actual or imagined involvement in crime. Thus when crime statistics reveal high percentages of blacks to be in the criminal justice system, the data serve as evidence of black moral degeneracy (Davis 1997, 268).

The discourse on welfare is closely tied to the one on crime; gender analysis of both discourses reveals that the welfare recipient is the female counterpart to the male criminal; the full stereotypical picture of the welfare-recipient-as-criminal is of a black, single, teenage mother. As Davis points out, "[T]he current liberal-conservative discourse around welfare criminalizes black single mothers, who are represented as deficient, manless, drug-using breeders of children, and as reproducers of an attendant culture of poverty," and she notes that "the woman who does drugs is criminalized both because she is a drug user and because, as a consequence, she cannot be a good mother" (1997, 275). The black, single, welfare-dependent mother is also considered to be responsible for the black male criminal, since it is in the deficient, female-headed household that the black male child develops his vices.[9]

9. For an example of the racialized discourse on welfare, see Patricia Williams's commentary on a series run in the *Washington Post*, "on the trials and tribulations of a welfare mother named RosaLee who seemingly had committed every sin the Bible could think of, including, of course, having many children by many different men, setting up her boyfriend to be killed, spreading AIDS, teaching her children to steal, and cheating the welfare system" (1995, 8). As Williams points out, such discourse—and the examples of it are plentiful in the mainstream media—gives the false impression that cases such as those of RosaLee are typical ones, portraying the case "as generally representative of a 'culture' of black pathology whose cure could only come from blacks themselves" (1995, 8).

There are clear policy implications to portraying blacks—with exceptions made for the middle class—as the morally degenerate exemplars of such vices as criminality and dependency, for in the current conservative context such a portrayal is not used to show the injustices of racism and other structural forms of oppression, but rather is used to demonstrate either that the moral deficiencies inhere in blacks or actually result from governmental attempts to end inequalities. Either way, the implication is that there are no injustices to blacks as a group that need to be rectified.

Shelby Steele makes this position explicit; by contrasting psychological and moral problems—which he locates in the individual—with social or systemic problems, he is able to site the source of blacks' problems within individual blacks, claiming that "if conditions have worsened for most of us as racism has receded, then much of the problem must be of our own making" (1990, 15). He believes that blacks' desire to blame "the system" for their problems is not based on there still being an actual system of racism that truly oppresses blacks; rather, the desire can be explained psychologically as a quest for innocence, the innocence that comes with being a victim. Such innocence, according to Steele, excuses blacks from the responsibility for changing their circumstances and protects blacks from their fears of failing, because all failure can be blamed on racism. Convinced that "from this point on, the race's advancement will come from the efforts of its individuals" (1990, 16), Steele focuses on the need for black individuals to change their own characters, something that requires what Steele calls "moral effort" (1990, 16). According to Steele, theories that point to the ways that structural racism victimizes blacks fail to recognize the role that this moral effort on the part of blacks could play; that is, they fail to recognize the "margin of choice" that he insists is always present. For instance, Steele cites the argument that black students have poor academic performance because they "internalize a message of inferiority that they receive from school and the larger society around them," but instead of acknowledging the ways in which educational and other institutions do function systemically to undermine blacks' sense of intellectual competence, Steele redirects attention to the part that individual blacks play in accepting the messages of inferiority, insisting that "the relevant question in the 1990s is why they *choose* to internalize this view of themselves" (1990, 27). He asks, "Why do they *voluntarily* perceive themselves as inferior?" (1990, 27–28; emphasis added). Steele thus simultaneously puts the responsibility for character change entirely on individual blacks and employs an account of character change that is fully voluntaristic; one can change if one wants to, and one can do so regardless of external conditions. His account leaves no space for implicating the oppressive social systems that cause moral damage.

IV

In this increasingly conservative climate (and a climate in which it is only the conservatives who are talking about character), it becomes more likely, regardless of the intention of the theorist, that an examination of the ways in which oppression produces damaged people will be used against the oppressed group and, as Steele

has used it, against the notion that structural changes must (still) be fought for. It thus becomes risky in practice to raise the issue of moral damage with the intention of using it for liberatory ends, and it remains risky even if one can make conceptual distinctions between different ways of attending to moral damage. Indeed, the conceptual distinctions are not hard to make; one can distinguish between the conservative victim-blaming stance, the liberal pity-evoking approach, and a critical position. One can point out that (unlike the conservative position) the critical position locates the source of moral damage in the continuing force of systems of oppression and rejects the individualist and voluntarist notion that one can simply will one's own character to change, and (unlike the liberal position), a more radical critical position is not concerned with appealing to the sympathy of the mainstream for reforms that will ameliorate damaging conditions, but rather is primarily concerned with understanding moral damage in order to develop collective practices within communities of resistance that will effectively address or repair the damage, both for the sake of the individuals who suffer from the damage and for the sake of better enabling members of the community to pursue liberatory projects, especially those projects that aim at fundamentally transforming the structures of society.[10]

10. It is interesting to note that "self-help" strategies including those aimed at repairing moral damage were formerly associated with radical politics, such as the Black Power movement. Such strategies made sense in the context of separatist politics, where autonomy from a dominant group was taken to be a prerequisite for developing an alternative set of values and learning to incorporate oppositional beliefs into the selves who thereby could enact their resistance to dominant values and practices. The conservative implications—that the government need not provide any form of support for members of a disadvantaged group as long as the group itself was taking responsibility for changing—were not anticipated precisely because they are in no way entailed by a separatist self-help strategy. See, for instance, Charles Hamilton's 1992 afterword to his and Stokely Carmichael's 1967 *Black Power*. Hamilton reflects on the fact that

> some Black Power advocates of an earlier time were frankly naïve in assuming that their *political* movement ["closing ranks" among Blacks and engaging in practices of self-help, including a "pride" politics aimed at changing Blacks' self-conceptions] would be inevitably an economically liberal one.... They assumed that the liberal position was obvious and correct and would be continuing precisely because their mass constituencies still needed so much in the way of vast governmental support. Such support had always been understood as necessary and frequently forthcoming in times of severe economic need. (Hamilton 1992, 209)

The assumption that a self-help strategy would be automatically paired with governmental redistributive measures was mistaken, and a segment of the Black Power movement split off to develop black capitalism:

> Black Power advocates on the left saw the conservatives as equating Black Power with Black Capitalism. This meant simply another version of exploitation of the masses, replacing white capitalists with black capitalists, and not really addressing the fundamental problems of an economic system that would leave most black people on the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. (1992, 210)

While both the left-wing and right-wing branches that developed out of Black Power pursued a separatist politics that, in the language I have been using, aimed at addressing moral damage in black people, they disagreed fundamentally on the interpretation and implications of that politics.

However, these distinctions among various approaches to understanding moral damage notwithstanding, in light of the empirical evidence of how damage imagery has functioned in the political arena (historically and in contemporary times), one might be led, for purely strategic reasons, to simply refuse to discuss the ways in which moral damage may be a significant aspect of oppression.

I am wary of the conservative context that is currently shaping the use of the concept of moral damage; I am also wary of the liberal use of damage imagery to evoke pity or sympathy from dominant groups in an attempt to have them show concern for the oppressed. But I worry about the agendas of potentially radical communities of resistance being influenced so strongly by the fear of cooptation by either conservatives or liberals. Specifically, I worry when radicals become unable to attend to questions of moral damage simply because every instance of recognizing moral damage appears to take sides in a contest for explaining subordination, where one might *either* point to character deficiencies *or* to institutionalized or structural forces, a binary that leaves no room for seeing damage to character itself as resulting from structures of oppression and no room for challenging these structures and *additionally* tending to damage already inflicted. Stephen Steinberg, for instance, seems to think that one cannot simultaneously attend to moral damage and work to change structural causes of oppression. Because he takes any sort of attention to character to indicate an allegiance to the conservative victim-blaming stance, he leaves no conceptual space for a radical version of a character-based ethics. It is out of this conceptual vacuum that Steinberg is forced, for instance, to understand Cornel West's concern with "the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair... widespread in black America" (West 1993, 12–13) to necessarily imply—despite ample evidence to the contrary—that West does not locate the problem in systemic racism. Steinberg goes so far as to charge West with "substitut[ing] a vapid and utterly inconsequential 'politics of conversion' for a genuine political solution" (1995, 132).

But Steinberg's own solution does not pay attention to the difficulty of repairing damage, suggesting instead that damage will be undone automatically when conditions change. Insisting on structural explanations for all differences of character between social groups, he argues that character change will correspond neatly to structural changes, claiming that "individuals and groups who encounter a favorable structure of opportunity respond accordingly, and exhibit high motivation, zeal for work, and other virtues that we associate with success" (1995, 14). Steinberg starts from an assertion that an oppressive system causes damage—an important assertion to make, given the conservatives' denial of it—but infers from this that removal of the oppressive forces will simultaneously undo the damage. While it may well be that favorable external conditions are necessary—or at least very helpful—for the development of certain virtues, it does not follow that such conditions are sufficient, especially once damage has already been done. It therefore does not follow that it is sufficient for the Left to focus *exclusively* on structural changes. If Steinberg were right that changing external conditions alone would undo moral damage, there would be no need for liberatory struggles to include any attention to the issue of moral damage.

A liberatory politics that recognizes the depth of damage under oppression and that insists on addressing it along with working for structural changes will still need to be careful not to fuel the conservative and liberal misuses of this acknowledgment of moral damage. First, it will be key to constantly reiterate the point that structures of oppression caused and continue to cause the damage and that the location of responsibility for selves constituted through systemic bad luck is complex. Second, it will also be important to realize that mainstream accounts of the virtues may be wrong in precisely the same way that status quo social arrangements corresponding to those virtues are wrong, and that therefore what are considered to be the virtues that subordinated people characteristically lack may not really be praiseworthy traits at all. For instance, the "virtue" of being able to command others with authority will be rejected when one rejects a hierarchical social arrangement where some give orders and others obey. Similarly, one must not take for granted that what gets labeled "damage" under dominant values are really undesirable traits. For instance, a greater inclination to express emotions—more typical of women than of men—should perhaps be seen as a praiseworthy trait rather than as a liability. Third, while one might need to make a general point that a subordinated group is likely to have members with certain forms of moral damage, it is essential to avoid stereotyping on the basis of such a claim. For example, acknowledging that there are higher rates of drug addiction in poor communities of color than in middle-class, white communities (and analyzing the systemic reasons for this) is necessary in order to mobilize the community to struggle against the underlying causes of addiction and to properly create resources for recovery for those who suffer from addiction. However, acknowledging these higher rates of drug abuse must never lead to the stereotypical assumption that any particular poor person of color is an addict. Because of the history of the use of damage imagery for pernicious ends, those attempting to reveal moral damage for liberatory ends will need to keep a constant vigilance for the many threatening pitfalls.

V

Nevertheless, I do believe that radicals need to examine moral damage—for purposes other than those of the conservatives and the liberals—and that a critical virtue ethics framework is useful not only because of the way that it makes conceptual space for such an examination, but also because it enables a more extensive inquiry about the relationship between character traits and flourishing, an inquiry that only suggests itself once one is willing to admit that all is not well with the selves or characters of subordinated people. Some of the negative consequences of ignoring moral damage should be clear. For instance, I have argued in chapter 1 that moral damage may interfere with the ability of an oppressed person to carry out the actions suggested by her/his own liberatory principles or at least to do so without internal conflict. Moral damage may also be directly destructive of the damaged

self; feelings of hopelessness and an internalized belief in one's own inferiority are examples of forms of damage that may not only retard resistance but also cause great pain or an immediate lack of well-being for their bearer.

A further reason for communities of resistance not to ignore moral damage is that the damage may lead one to act oppressively toward others. Card's attention to the question of moral responsibility under oppression is motivated in part by her insistence that "although it is morally problematic for beneficiaries of oppression to hold its victims responsible for bad conduct," particularly when such conduct was chosen by a self who was morally damaged by oppression, "victims have responsibilities of their own to peers and descendants" (1996, 41). She is thinking, here, of the ways in which "women's oppression and childhood abuse are intertwined historically," such that "both are morally damaging, and the damage of one can apparently lead to that of the other" (1996, 41). Thus, there are cases, for Card, where it would be inappropriate to blame someone for acting out of a morally damaged character, but where one still must be able to demand that the person take responsibility for her character and her actions. Card writes: "Overcoming and resisting our own oppression require us to *take* responsibility for situations for which others could not reasonably hold us responsible . . . , despite our complicity" (1996, 41).

Seeing the deleterious effects of failing to attend to moral damage may be enough to motivate one to insist on acknowledging moral damage despite the strategic risks. However, I am further motivated by seeing what sorts of projects—both theoretical and practical—suggest themselves once moral damage is recognized. I place the projects within a critical virtue ethics framework, where the damage in question can be specifically construed as damage to the virtues. This framework, by maintaining the simple point that even Aristotle endorses, namely, that flourishing requires external goods as well as the right character, can assert, contrary to the conservative understanding of the role of character, that social, political, and economic systems create the most formidable barriers to members of oppressed groups' ability to flourish. Then, taking as a given the need for structural changes, the critical virtue ethics framework permits one to proceed to raise a number of questions about the relationship of character (with its likely damage) to flourishing.

Examining this relationship is useful, I would contend, because doing so will reveal otherwise hidden harms of oppression (and I value awareness of these harms whether or not such awareness puts one in a position to successfully prevent or repair harm). While structural barriers to flourishing are readily visible without the help of a virtue ethics framework, multiple, more-subtle ways in which flourishing is prevented under oppression come into view when one uses this framework to link moral excellence with flourishing. Lacking some virtues as one does when one suffers moral damage—or, as I will argue in later chapters, having to develop virtues that are disconnected from flourishing—can be understood as a real deprivation created by oppressive conditions.

What becomes possible once it has been acknowledged that oppression gives rise to moral damage is the philosophical project of sorting through

potential virtues and vices to try to determine which traits will promote flourishing,[11] and the practical project of learning how to cultivate the desired traits and overcome the destructive ones. I have little to say about the practical project (but hope others have much to say about it), for it requires answering largely empirical questions.[12] It may call for the work of social scientists (wary as one must be of how oppressed groups have been dealt with by social science) who can research questions of how the self learns new habits of desire, emotion, and action. Or, it may be that people working together in activist communities can be the ones to develop political practices that will bring about personal or character transformations along with structural changes, under the assumption that character will not necessarily change automatically with structural changes. Since character traits do tend to be constructed and reconstructed socially, it may be through collective practices that there will be the most potential to reverse moral damage. To give just one such example, consider the women's martial arts movement, which since the beginning of the second wave of the women's liberation movement has been politicized as it is linked to work against violence against women. This movement has not only consisted in women training in self-defense and martial arts (and thus learning a set of skills, a discipline, and an art form), but also in these women developing certain traits associated with this training, traits such as a sense of self-worth, assertiveness, resistance to violation, physical courage, and integrity of the body/self.[13] Indeed, there have been many attempts within the feminist movement, with its commitment to making the personal political, to link personal transformation with fundamental changes in social and political systems, though as I argued in chapter 1, these personal transformations have frequently not proceeded successfully, since many feminist political projects have overestimated the degree of control that one can have in bringing about personal transformation.

I have quite a bit more to say about the philosophical project than about the practical one. This project involves the normative evaluation of character, that is, judging which character traits will count as virtues and which as vices. If an account of moral excellence—tailored for the conditions of surviving and resisting oppression—were produced, it could serve to map out the more practical project; or, if such an account proves elusive (as I think it does), this too sheds light on the insidious effects of oppression, for oppression can be seen to complicate the appraisal of character traits by muddying any potentially praiseworthy trait.

11. Card, noting that oppressive circumstances may give rise both to special insights and to forms of damage, writes that "a challenge for feminist moral philosophers has been to distinguish the insights from the damage" (1996, 8).

12. Martha Nussbaum's 2001 *Upheavals of Thought* is an example of a book that undertakes both the normative task of evaluating certain traits (understood in a complicated way as emotions), such as compassion, and the nitty-gritty work of outlining—on the basis of much empirical research—how those traits might be fostered in a democratic citizenry.

13. One source for further information is the Web site of the National Women's Martial Arts Federation, which also has links to many women's/feminist martial arts schools: http://www.nwmaf.org/. See also Bar On 2001 for a consideration of what may be problematic about the sorts of habits learned by women training in the martial arts.

A virtue ethics framework might seem to suggest that one could identify a virtue by determining which traits tend to contribute to or be constitutive of human flourishing. This approach actually oversimplifies the relationship of virtue to flourishing in several ways. Flourishing, at least for Aristotle, is defined in terms of virtue (*NE* 1098a16–17), which in turn is understood as excellence of a specifically human function (*NE* 1097b22–1098a15). Avoiding the sticky issue of a human function, adopting a conception of flourishing from some other source, and working from there toward a list of virtues is going about the process backward.[14] Because it is not the case that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for flourishing, this reversal poses an additional problem: there may be virtues that fail to lead to or constitute flourishing (at least under some conditions), and these virtues may be missed by merely searching for the traits that are connected with flourishing. One possibility for addressing this additional difficulty is to designate as virtues those traits that *under favorable conditions* would tend to enable flourishing; other possibilities will emerge later in the book.

This leaves the problem of what conception of flourishing should guide one in the search for corresponding virtues. I will not try to argue for a conception of flourishing.[15] What I will do instead is to adopt a general conception of flourishing from what is implicit in the goals of liberatory movements (such as feminist movements and movements for racial liberation) and use this conception of flourishing as a guide, though one that becomes quite complicated, for analyzing the relationship between virtue and flourishing under oppression and examining some potential virtues under these conditions. To explain this move, I need only point to the fact that searching for the virtues suited for

14. Aristotle does not take a conception of flourishing, or *eudaimonia*, as given by what (certain) people already believe or know (as I will do in order to have a working conception of flourishing), but he does arrive at a list of the virtues in this way, using as a starting point the values of those who have been "brought up in good habits" (*NE* 1095b5–6) and creating some problems of circularity (how does one know which are the good habits and therefore know which are the well-brought-up people with whom one ought to consult?).

15. Trying to present a conception of human flourishing opens up a range of thorny possibilities stretching between two poles, both of which I want to avoid: the first pole is marked by the endorsement of a universal account of human flourishing, and the second consists of a relativist or subjectivist acceptance of just about any version of flourishing that someone might adopt for her/himself. Martha Nussbaum does not shy away from the first pole, endorsing what she believes to be a universal account of human flourishing. Her approach, which she calls the "capabilities approach," lists human capabilities (that is, opportunities for functioning) for which she believes all nations should provide support, and she uses the list to argue that governments should be politically pressured to provide guarantees that each and every citizen shall be enabled with each of the capabilities. Many items on her list are quite broad and would be hard to reject as universally desirable, but they also may be difficult to implement in practical ways without losing the universality that they do have. Despite Nussbaum's embrace of universal goods, her overall aim is a liberal one: she uses an account of human nature that assumes that humans engage in choices as autonomous individuals (though highly influenced socially) and privileges the preservation of an individual's capability to *choose* to develop and maintain certain human functions. Nussbaum thus believes that she allows for plurality despite the universality of her account of human functions, since no individual is required to develop a particular function. See Nussbaum 1999.

surviving and resisting oppression requires a specific account of human flourishing to a no-greater extent than committing to any particular form of social or political change does. Those fighting oppression must already hold certain implicit beliefs about what a flourishing or good life is. 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 would not have any basis for objecting to oppression; one would not struggle for social changes if one did not believe the changes to be for the good. To oppose 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 for one 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 marked by the overwhelming loss of loved ones through racial or ethnic persecution; or that the disintegration of self that occurs under torture destroys rather than enhances one's life.

The normative work of evaluating character—if one bases this evaluation on a determination of which traits contribute to or constitute a particular conception of flourishing—demands no more of an endorsement of values than the normative work of maintaining political commitments does, whether one manifests this commitment in theoretical arguments or in practice through activism. However, conceptions of human flourishing are not always made explicit or visible within communities that work for liberatory changes, and so the search for corresponding virtues may seem like an importation of values rather than simply an identification of the character traits whose moral worth is already implicit in the liberatory goals of the community.

In the context of communities whose commitments are to fighting oppression, investigation of any character trait may take the form of asking about its consistency with the liberatory aims of the community. What complicates matters is an ambiguity in how a trait is to be connected to the liberatory goals of a community of resistance or to the conception of flourishing implied by those goals. One might ask, for instance, does the character trait help its bearer to engage in liberatory struggles, the purpose of which is to eventually enable a good life for all? Or, alternatively, one might ponder, does the character trait help its bearer to live well now (or to contribute to others' living well now), in the context of continuing oppression, where living well is itself understood in part by the same liberatory values that one wishes ultimately to be able to live out more fully? Because the answers to these two sorts of questions often diverge, there may be a set of traits whose moral status remains problematic precisely because of the context of oppression in which the trait is evaluated. The last three chapters of this book will explore the implications of there being such traits, suggesting that this indicates that there is a sort of moral trouble created by oppression and the demand for resistance.

3

The Ordinary Vices of Domination

I

This chapter departs from a focus on the victims and resisters of oppression to address the implications of thinking of members of dominant groups as morally damaged by the same oppressive structures from which they are meanwhile thought to benefit. From Socrates' insistence (contra Thrasymachus) that the unjust cannot be happy, to the more contemporary wisdom that "money don't buy you love," there is a history of suspicion about the goods that social, political, or economic power can bring. Does privilege that is conferred on a person because of her/his social positioning really bring the wonderful and coveted things that one might expect it to, and does it bring the ultimate good, namely, does it enable a person to flourish, to lead the good life? If members of groups that are structurally positioned to exercise power do in fact have serious moral flaws, this ought to stand in the way of their own well-being. Perhaps what they have, then, is not truly privilege, for if they cannot lead flourishing lives, what good are the so-called advantages that they have?

Socrates' belief that the unjust cannot lead the good life constitutes a core assumption of virtue ethics. As Aristotle more fully argues, flourishing depends upon virtue; *eudaimonia* is an "activity of soul in conformity with excellence [virtue]" (*NE* 1098a16–17). Due to its central place in ancient Greek ethics (and perhaps also due to its implausibility in contemporary times), the claim that the "wicked" cannot flourish has been much discussed in the literature on virtue ethics.[1] I am interested here in a very particular, contextualized implication

1. Joel Feinberg is a defender of the claim that the wicked can indeed flourish or, more precisely, the wicked are not at all harmed by their wickedness as long as they themselves do not desire a better character and their wickedness does not work against any of their other interests. That is, he rejects the idea of a "purely moral harm." He writes: "If a wicked person has no ulterior interest in having a good character, and if such a character is not *in* his [*sic*] (other) interests, then his depraved character is no harm to him (*pace* Plato *et al.*), and even if he becomes worse, he does not necessarily become worse off" (1984, 66).