

BOOK REVIEW

Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles

by Lisa Tessman PhD

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The fourth sentence in this book is: “My concern is with the *selves* who endure and resist oppression and, in particular, with the way in which the devastating conditions confronted by these selves both limit and burden their moral goodness” (3). The second last sentence in the book is: “The choice to go on living, to insist upon life --with its sufferings and its joys -- is an existential choice of great significance under oppression, and this choice captures something crucial about eudaimonism” (168). The intervening 165 pages offer a tenacious examination of the relevance of Aristotelian virtue ethics theory today for people facing dilemmas impacted significantly by troubling social norms and systems.

The book was initially appealing for three reasons. First, analyses of mental health and addictions-related problems often turn to legal rights, protected freedoms, and utilitarian calculus to help determine ethically defensible responses. Virtue theory is used infrequently. Second, although Aristotle’s virtue theory focused on the symbiosis between individual character, communal prosperity and *eudaimonia* (i.e., flourishing as a human being), *eudaimonia* was envisioned for only some (e.g., not for those who were enslaved). Third, societal discrimination and stigmatization of people living with a mental health or addiction concern and their families continue today. I hoped Tessman’s work could render Aristotle’s theory more inclusive and could explain whether someone who worries about his character and acting with integrity—and who is neither an “un-seeing” idealist nor a “all-is-lost” cynic—either can live with seemingly intractable oppressive practices or can resist time after time after time.

Moral harm of the self unifies the first three chapters. Chapter one, “Regretting the Self One is,” works with four types of luck, individual control, agency, and responsibility to help refine differences between producing good outcomes, *acting* virtuously, and *being* virtuous and help challenge today’s popular embrace of unlimited personal transformation. Admittedly the chapter is difficult and inclusion of some practical examples would have helped. Nonetheless the nuanced distinctions are pivotal for increased accuracy in understanding and judging people’s character.

But what if a person has been morally wounded? In Chapter two, “The Damage of Moral Damage,” Tessman shares her ongoing worries about the stereotypic political debates in the U.S.A. wherein conservatives tend to blame oppressed people for their vicious actions (e.g., violence, substance use, criminal activities) while liberals tend to excuse them. Eschewing such simplification and polarization, the author explains the differences between holding an oppressed person responsible for her character flaws versus blaming her for them. Understanding these differences can help avoid added oppression of someone who is oppressed already as well as avoid expecting too little of her.

Although chapter two opens with a seemingly surprising statement that people in dominant positions are more morally damaged than those in subordinate positions, arguments supporting this claim make up the third chapter. Tessman wonders whether Aristotle’s claim that a good life relies on living virtuously is outdated in Western society today. This chapter’s content and questions were gripping, in part because of my own privileged circumstances plus my work in healthcare ethics. The author laments the persistent indifference of the privileged (who I take to be those belonging to the upper and middle classes) to the unrelenting hardships and disadvantages of others. Her recommended corrective begins with developing the virtue of sensitivity to the plight of others.

The next three chapters shift to the idea that virtues themselves can be burdened. In other words, being virtuous has personal costs and this challenges Aristotle’s claim that virtues are an important contributor to flourishing. As chapter three ends by advocating sensitivity, chapter four explores how a sensitive person copes with the fact of unremitting and extensive suffering in the world. Reminiscent of MC Escher’s art that interweaves possibility with impossibility, Tessman insightfully and candidly discusses ways a person can avoid cynicism or martyrdom and remain involved.

Chapters five and six tackle the costs of liberatory struggles wherein a person of character fights systemic or structural oppression. In specific, the traits of anger and courage are scrutinized by comparing how they are often extolled for resistance efforts with how a resister’s character or quality of life can be harmed. Just

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as she wonders when is anger and courage a vice versus a virtue, Tessman also wonders when is loyalty to one's "group," be it of resisters or oppressed people, a vice versus a virtue. Both chapters probe well beyond generalized or romanticized views about battling injustice to show why having virtues and being virtuous are very complex and why one can feel ambivalent about the fact of having a character.

The concluding chapter offers ways to help identify virtues in four different situations. This was a pleasant change from the previous chapters' density although including a few examples to more clearly illuminate and contrast the situations would have been appreciated. Given that I tend to be practically minded, reading this chapter first may have made the others easier to follow.

In summary, I plan to re-read this book for three reasons. First, it brings Aristotle's virtue theory into contemporary times to understand people's characters -- their virtues and vices -- as well as how to appropriately evaluate them and how to appropriately evaluate the systems of which they are part. So too, for understanding and evaluating one's own character. Second, Tessman also engages pertinent liberal and feminist viewpoints to help ensure that virtue ethics theory is sound enough to withstand important political critiques. Third, Tessman's work content is not just agent-centred. It purposively focuses on agents who must live in or work within unjust situations. Since healthcare dilemmas are often about injustice, discrimination, power, or marginalization as well as about those directly involved, this book will be useful to those working in healthcare, be they clinicians, ethics specialists, or community advocates. In the Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle extols *phronesis* or practical wisdom. The insights, candor, reflections, and hope that make up Burdened Virtues should help its readers meet Aristotle's ethical standards for good character and right action.

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