

# Eudaimonism, Human Nature, and the Burdened Virtues

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*This article explores the prospects for a eudaimonist moral theory that is both feminist and Aristotelian. Making the moral philosophy developed by Aristotle compatible with a feminist moral perspective presents a number of philosophical challenges. Lisa Tessman offers one of the most sustained feminist engagements with Aristotelian eudaimonism (Tessman 2005). However, in arguing for the account of flourishing that her eudaimonist theory invokes, Tessman avoids taking a stand either for or against the role Aristotle assigned to human nature. She draws her account of flourishing instead from the beliefs about flourishing implicit in the feminist and black freedom movements. I examine the implicit conception of flourishing in the writings of two prominent leaders of the black freedom movement—Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X—and argue that Tessman’s attempt to avoid the “sticky issue” of human nature is not successful. Tessman’s defense of the burdened virtues depends on a particular reading of human nature as does a eudaimonist account of the virtues more generally.*

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The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.  
—Audre Lorde

## I. ARISTOTELIAN FEMINIST EUDAIMONISM AND THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN NATURE

From the perspective of women’s liberation, appeals to human nature have both a sordid past and a seemingly perennial appeal. On the one hand, appeals to human nature have time and time again been pressed into service in support of the moral, social, and legal subordination of women to men (Mahowald 1978; Lloyd 1984; Tuana 1993). On the other hand, the appeal to a common humanity—especially within the liberal political tradition—has been a powerful means by which to contend against unequal treatment and unjustified diminutions of women’s status and

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worth (for example, a classic is Wollstonecraft 1792/2004; see also Okin 1989; Nussbaum 2000). Nevertheless, many feminist theorists remain suspicious that, despite some appearances to the contrary, appeals to nature are—to use Audre Lorde’s image—one of the master’s tools. Thus, they abjure the appeal to nature as spurious at best and positively damaging at worst. What Lorde says may be true. Even so, agents with liberatory projects face a difficult question: Which tools belong to the master and which have been illicitly appropriated from out of the commons? In the case of appeals to human nature, I want to argue for the latter.

This essay argues that feminist eudaimonist moral theory needs to be explicit about the account of human nature that eudaimonism requires. Although I acknowledge that appeals to human nature have been instrumental in women’s oppression, I believe a eudaimonist moral theory needs an explicit and substantive conception of human nature in order to articulate and defend an account of flourishing and conception of the virtues.

A number of feminist moral philosophers have adopted a eudaimonist moral framework for feminist analysis and critique of oppression (Cuomo 1998; Snow 2002; Tessman 2005). Aristotle has been a principal inspiration here, but Aristotle’s conclusions about the nature and place of women in society suggest that feminists must be cautious about how Aristotle’s moral philosophy is appropriated. Lisa Tessman offers one of the most provocative and sustained feminist engagements with Aristotelian eudaimonism (Tessman 2005). Furthermore, Tessman proposes a number of significant methodological departures from Aristotle. For our purposes, the most significant is that a feminist eudaimonism can avoid implicating its account of flourishing in a positive conception of human nature.

Tessman proposes to circumvent complicated questions about human nature by adopting the vision of flourishing implicit in the goals of liberatory political movements such as feminism and black liberation. In what follows I press on the viability of this move. First, I argue that when examined in detail, the writings of prominent spokespersons of the black freedom movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, do not convey a single, coherent—or even mutually compatible—vision of human flourishing. Specifically, we find competing understandings of the requirements for psychological health, one of the core elements of human flourishing. Second, Tessman’s most innovative contribution to a feminist eudaimonist moral theory, the concept of a burdened virtue, requires an account of human flourishing that is identical to neither Martin Luther King, Jr.’s nor Malcolm X’s. This is not necessarily fatal for Tessman’s thesis about the burdened virtues, but a philosophically sound defense of the burdened virtues as both “virtues” and “burdens” depends on a particular reading of human nature and the requirements of human psychological health that is distinct from what we find in either Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X. The reasons here are instructive, and this analysis suggests a feminist eudaimonist moral framework will not be able to avoid substantive claims about human nature. This analysis also enables us to see more clearly the significance of nature claims for distinguishing simple consequentialist accounts of the virtues from eudaimonist accounts of the virtues.

The argument proceeds as follows: section II lays out Tessman's feminist eudaimonism and her argument for the existence of what she calls "burdened virtues." In section III, in order to critically evaluate Tessman's argument for the burdened virtues and her claim to do without a conception of human nature, I turn to the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Both saw psychological health as essential to flourishing. However, I argue that they disagree about the requirements of psychological health, and thus there is not a single concept of flourishing within the black freedom movement. In section IV, I argue that Tessman's own conception of psychological health and human flourishing—on which the burdened virtues depends—requires a particular understanding of human nature, of what is both possible and ideal for creatures like us. If this conception of human nature and human flourishing is accepted, the eudaimonist grounds for Tessman's claims about the burdened virtues become clearer and more reasonable, though not uncontroversial.

## II. LISA TESSMAN'S FEMINIST EUDAIMONISM: REVISING ARISTOTLE AND DISCLOSING THE BURDENED VIRTUES

In *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggle*, Tessman argues that by tying together the ideas of flourishing and moral goodness, a eudaimonist moral perspective can reveal oppression to be not only an impediment to freedom (which it often is) but also an impediment to becoming a morally good person with the kind of character necessary for full human flourishing. On a eudaimonist framework, the virtues are states of character that benefit their possessor by enabling their possessor to flourish. Tessman argues that oppression disrupts the relationship between virtue and flourishing. In contexts of oppression, agents may be morally required to cultivate character traits that, even while they manifest a noble opposition to oppression, undermine the psychological conditions necessary for the agent's flourishing. She calls these praiseworthy traits that undermine the agent's psychological capacity for flourishing "burdened virtues." Thus, Tessman argues that a eudaimonist analysis reveals a distinctively moral harm of oppression and an unrecognized aspect of the "double bind" that oppression so characteristically entails (Frye 1983, 2).<sup>1</sup>

In order to argue that oppression disrupts the relationship between virtue and flourishing, one needs some concrete understanding of flourishing. Aristotle seems to begin with the concept of virtue and to define flourishing in its terms (Aristotle 1999, 1095b5–6; 1098a16–17; Tessman 2005, 51), and the idea of a characteristically human function forges the philosophical link between virtue and flourishing (compare Simpson 1997). For Aristotle, human nature is expressed in our species-characteristic behavior, most importantly in the use of reason to guide our lives. When we reason well, we live well, or "flourish" as *human beings* (Aristotle 1999, 1097b25–1098a17). The virtues name particular excellences in this use of reason to guide feeling, desiring, judging, and acting. On an Aristotelian framework, then, claims about human nature enter in as support for the account of flourishing, the basic idea being that we must know what it is to be human in order to know what it is to live well as *humans*.

Tessman needs a positive conception of flourishing but wants to avoid the “sticky issue of a human function” (Tessman 2005, 51). Thus she departs from Aristotle’s method here.<sup>2</sup> “I will not try to argue for a conception of flourishing. 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” (51). She supports this strategy by arguing that “Those fighting oppression must already hold certain implicit beliefs about what a flourishing or good life is. . . . [O]ne would not struggle for social changes if one did not believe the changes to be for the good” (52).

One important aspect of a flourishing life implicit within these movements is psychological health. Concern for psychological health is shown through the persistent attempt to name and find ways to protect against or remedy the psychological damage inflicted by oppression (114). For example, “psychological oppression” names the phenomenon whereby the oppressed come to internalize judgments about their own inferiority (Bartky 1990b). This can lead to the belief that the unjust treatment one receives is justified. Other possible indicators of psychological damage include “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, [and] a lack of self-confidence” (Tessman 2005, 37). In contrast, at least part of what psychological health entails is an accurate estimation of one’s own worth and dignity, as well as a certain degree of hope, or at least not despair. Activists and theorists in both the feminist and black freedom movement have embraced psychological health as an important aspect of the kind of life they are striving to make possible. Tessman believes beginning with a concrete concept of flourishing and working backward to the list of virtues instrumentally or constitutively necessary for such flourishing may enable us to identify nonstandard virtues unique to contexts of oppression.

Looking to the politics of personal transformation, Tessman catalogues a number of traits identified as virtues by feminist and antiracist theorists, useful for enabling agents to either survive or resist their own oppression (Bartky 1990a; Frye 1992; hooks 1993; Ferguson 1995; Card 1996; Kruks 2005). Insofar as survival and resistance to oppression are necessary if one is to have any hope of eventual flourishing, these traits bear an important relationship to flourishing.

Anger or rage is a principal candidate for a virtue in this class. Anger is seen as a powerful motivator for social change. “Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (Lorde 1984, 127; quoted in Tessman 2005, 117). According to Marilyn Frye, when one is angry, one “claims that one is in certain ways and dimensions respectable” (Frye 1983, 90; quoted in Tessman 2005, 118). Anger thus registers that deserved respect has been denied. In patriarchal contexts where it is precisely not assumed that women are deserving of equal respect, Elizabeth Spelman sees anger as an act of “insubordination,” a challenge to one’s assigned place as a subordinate (Spelman 1989).

Much of the feminist analysis of anger comports with the idea of anger as an Aristotelian virtue. Anger, on Aristotle’s understanding, “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" (Aristotle 1984, bk. II, chaps. 2–3; Tessman 2005, 120). For Aristotle, a man's anger at injustice is appropriate and praiseworthy so long as it is directed "at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time" (Aristotle 1999, 1125b32–33). Similarly, influential feminist analyses have conceptualized anger as an appropriate response to acts of disrespect and injustice (Frye 1983), but they have also cautioned against anger that is misdirected toward other subordinated persons (Lorde 1984) or that is excessive and thereby unjustified (Spelman 1989). Along with Aristotle, these feminist theorists stake out a proper place for anger, so long as it is expressed for the right reason, directed at the right person and in the right way.

Although there is a kind of anger that has a clear resonance with Aristotelian virtue because it communicates a demand to be respected as one ought to be, there is another kind of anger for which the claim to virtue on an Aristotelian framework is more problematic. María Lugones has called this kind of anger "second-level anger" in order to distinguish it from the anger described above, which she calls "first-level anger." The intent of first-level anger is communicative. Through it, subordinated peoples attempt to "communicate their refusal to accept subordination and their demand of respect for themselves as moral agents" (Tessman 2005, 123). Lugones describes how second-level anger is quite different. When it expresses itself, "the gestures are wild... the voice loud; the use of space extensive; the body flushed" (Lugones 1995, 206). Second-level anger does not aim to be communicative, in part, because it is a total rejection of the "world of sense" within which the relations of subordination that have inspired this anger exist (204). When anger is permitted to take on such huge proportions, Tessman calls it "separatist anger," and she suggests its radical potential lies in its "very refusal to be toned down or moderated" (Tessman 2005, 123). A form of anger like this is appropriately described as rage.

Is it possible to see rage as a virtue, as a praiseworthy state of character and the appropriate response to oppression? Tessman argues that the second-order "separatist anger" of rage can meet the Aristotelian requirements that a virtue must be 1) a mean between extremes that 2) expresses the appropriate response to the situation and is 3) constitutive of or at least instrumental to achieving the agent's good. In response to criterion one, even though rage is clearly an extreme form of anger, Tessman argues rage is actually the mean relative to the circumstances (Tessman 2005, 124). Anything less than an extreme kind of anger would be inadequate because one is not being angry in the degree one ought to be, relative to the circumstances. In regard to criterion two, rage is arguably the appropriate response to the situation, since in a context of pervasive and unrelenting injustice, "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" (124). Finally, Tessman argues that this kind of anger is preferable to other alternative responses such as self-hatred or depression (165). It also makes one capable of sustaining a "refusal to extend any sympathy toward those whom one must politically oppose" (116–17, 164), thereby advancing one's prospects for flourishing. Thus, rage has at least an instrumental link with the agent's eventual flourishing (123).

However, it is hard to square the assessment of rage as a virtue with the central eudaimonist tenet that the virtues benefit their possessor. Rage, and the sympathy toward oppressors that it blocks, is in no way constitutive of human flourishing. Under better circumstances, it would not be a virtue, and it is only because of the extreme conditions of oppression that this trait is needed (Tessman 2005, 165). Rage may help one to resist oppression and may be an appropriate response relative to the circumstances, but it is difficult to imagine such a seething rage figuring in a full, flourishing human life. In Tessman's estimation, rage is bound to be psychologically unhealthy and corrosive for its bearer (124). Furthermore, because we are inculcating a stable psychological disposition, we are changing the self in ways not easily "undone" or repaired. Having sensitized oneself to injustice to the point that one is capable of sustaining a chronic state of rage, one may not be able to simply, so to speak, "turn it off." One will have become someone for whom full human flourishing is out of reach. Rage is, therefore, a prime example of a "burdened virtue." It is a "morally praiseworthy trait that is at the same time bad for its bearer, disconnected from its bearer's well-being" (124).

To summarize, rage on Tessman's account is a virtue because it is a praiseworthy response, manifesting a noble opposition to one's own oppression and a refusal to be resigned to injustice. However, rage is also burdensome from a eudaimonist perspective because it interferes with the psychological conditions of personal flourishing. In this way, Tessman argues that a critical virtue ethics, attentive to the dynamics of oppression and operating out of a eudaimonist perspective, illuminates an overlooked moral harm of oppression. The virtues are supposed to enable flourishing, but the virtues required by contexts of oppression undermine flourishing. Thus the agent is doubly harmed by oppression: both the internal and the external conditions of flourishing are disrupted.

How should we evaluate Tessman's claim to have identified character traits that are praiseworthy and yet damaging to their bearer? The burdened virtues are neither desirable nor choice-worthy from the perspective of the world that politically resistant selves are striving to realize in the fight for justice and equality. Still, labeling these traits "virtues" implies they are an ideal of sorts. I suggest that the burdened virtues should be thought of as ideals in the sense that they identify the best response possible, not only given the external circumstances but also given the circumstances of human nature, in particular, human psychology. Naming the best response possible under these circumstances enables us to offer action-guidance to agents confronted with nonideal circumstances and tortured options. If the claim of the burdened virtues either to burdensomeness or to being an ideal falls, then so does Tessman's argument that a eudaimonist moral framework sheds light on an unacknowledged moral harm of oppression. Oppression might still be understood as interfering with many external conditions of flourishing, but it would not follow that oppression constitutes the moral harm named by the phenomenon of the burdened virtues. Understood as I suggest here, we also see more clearly the reason that the situation of the oppressed is tragic on Tessman's view: the best that is possible is not very good; indeed, it constitutes a form of moral damage.

In order to claim that the burdened virtues constitute a form of damage to one's capacity to flourish, Tessman must presuppose some conception of flourishing. She claims to be appealing to the vision of flourishing implicit in the liberatory political movements of the twentieth century, especially the fight for women's liberation and the fight for black freedom. Section III compares the visions of flourishing articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, taking them as two influential and visionary leaders of the black freedom movement. The first issue is that Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X have divergent visions of human flourishing. The second issue is that Tessman's is identical to neither. This suggests she must be working with her own conception of flourishing. The defense of her position, over and against Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, requires certain views about human nature. In the conclusion, I'll suggest what I think these views must be. Tessman's position is not unreasonable, but neither is it uncontroversial, and maintaining her conception of flourishing over and against the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X requires substantive argument about human nature.

Endorsing the concept of "burdened virtues" and recommending such character traits for contexts of oppression is potentially perilous. The concept implies that no better alternatives are available. If this is wrong, and some people voluntarily cultivate these traits, thinking they are the "best possible," *we who have recommended them will be morally responsible* for the burdens they incur. Our blindness to alternatives will be partly responsible for their consequent inability to flourish. Acknowledging this should not distract us from the root of the problem: the systems of oppression that put agents in situations where it is so impossibly difficult to discern the best response. But I do say this to bring the full gravity of the situation to the fore. The concept of burdened virtues is supposed to provide trait guidance, and recommending a morally damaging course of character formation is dangerous.

### III. MALCOLM AND MARTIN'S TWO VISIONS OF FLOURISHING

The twentieth-century black freedom movement in the United States was powered by a variety of different (and sometimes competing) intellectual commitments. These commitments found expression predominantly in two political philosophies: integrationism and separatism (or nationalism). We can take Martin Luther King, Jr. as representative of the integrationist branch and Malcolm X as representative of the separatist branch of the black freedom movement, since both were widely recognized as public spokespersons for these two philosophies.<sup>3</sup> (From here forward, I will refer to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X either by their full names without titles, or I will follow the scholarly convention, employed in the literature comparing their lives, of referring to them by their first names only.<sup>4</sup>)

Martin's and Malcolm's positions converged in significant ways at the end of their lives (Cone 1991, 244–71), but at the height of their influence, they gave voice to quite different visions of black liberation and psychological health. Given that psychological health is a core constituent of a flourishing life, it is a mistake to think

there is a singular conception of flourishing in this movement.<sup>5</sup> When we move to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these competing visions of liberation and flourishing and the ideals of character they require, the underlying convictions about human nature are crucial for making a reasonable judgment.

I will first lay out Martin's vision, and then I will discuss Malcolm's in order to show that their goals imply different conceptions of flourishing. As James H. Cone has described, Martin's vision centered on integration, insisted on nonviolence, and idealized *agape* love—to the point of love of one's enemy—as the basis of self-respect. Malcolm's vision, by contrast, centered on separation, insisted on the right of every person to self-defense, and idealized self-love as the basis of self-respect.<sup>6</sup> Although it is tempting to represent integration and separation simply as different means to the same end, these actually reflect divergent convictions about the underlying requirements of psychological health and human flourishing. Integration and separation are not merely different means to the same end, but different means required by the competing understandings of what a healthy black psyche requires.

Martin's liberatory vision centered on the goal of an "integrated society," often called "the beloved community." His ideal of integration went beyond mere desegregation, and its realization depended on "the welcome acceptance of Negroes into the total range of human activities" (Washington 1986, 118). Integration's goal was redemption, reconciliation, friendship, and understanding between whites and blacks (118). Integration expressed the ideal of true community between persons, required recognition for the dignity of every person, and promoted self-respect (Cone 1991, 109).

The ideal of the beloved community was intimately wed to the ideal of *agape* love, the love of God for all human beings that enables us to love others, even our worst enemies. Martin taught that this kind of love is fully consistent with "loving the person who does the evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does" (Washington 1986, 88). This kind of love does not require liking, but it does require resisting hatred, which "distorts the personality and scars the soul" (102–103) and maintaining "redeeming good will for all men" (88). Rooted in the Christian tradition, Martin's antidote to hatred was love, even to the point of love of one's enemies, and for Martin this implied one must be willing to accept suffering rather than inflict suffering on others. Speaking on this point, he said, "To suffer in a righteous cause is to grow to our humanity's full stature. If only to save himself from bitterness, the Negro needs the vision to see the ordeals of this generation as the opportunity to transfigure himself and American society" (487). Martin believed it would be impossible to realize the beloved community through violent means. First, directed at oppressors, violence would not bring about repentance, it would only perpetuate the cycle of hatred-violence-hatred, entrench bitterness, and block the reconciliation needed to bring about the beloved community. Second, Martin believed the discipline of nonviolence had the power to make public the dignity and courage of the resister, thus inspiring self-respect and commanding respect from others. Whereas violence directed at persons is a pragmatic denial of their value, nonviolence "exalts the personality of the *segregator* as well as the *segregated*" (125).



For Martin, healthy self-respect is realized in communal recognition but grounded in agape love. A healthy self-respect makes one willing to accept suffering and refuse violence, even violence in self-defense. Martin's refusal of violence even in self-defense may be the hardest aspect of his philosophy to follow. Malcolm certainly could not.

Whereas Martin's liberatory vision of black flourishing rested on the goal of integration achieved through nonviolent resistance to injustice and love of one's enemies, Malcolm's vision of flourishing called for the separation of blacks from whites, an absolute commitment to the right of self-defense, and the principle of black self-love.

Malcolm believed separation from whites and unity between blacks was a precondition to any (possible, eventual) integration with whites (Cone 1991, 109). Separatism was, in his mind, essential for black people to learn to love and respect themselves and to stop accepting a value hierarchy that placed black lives at the bottom of the pile. As Malcolm understood it, the desire to integrate was itself a sign of self-hatred and symptomatic of a damaged black psyche (108). "Any Negro trying to integrate is actually admitting his inferiority, because he is admitting that he wants to become a part of a 'superior' society," Malcolm said (*New York Amsterdam News*, July 1, 1961, 37; quoted in Cone 1991, 110).

For Malcolm, a righteous rage at injustice and at those who perpetrated it was a genuinely indispensable weapon in the fight to overcome oppression. According to Cornel West, "Malcolm X's notion of psychic conversion depends on the idea that black spaces, in which black community, humanity, love, care, concern, and support flourish, will emerge from a boiling black rage" (West 2001, 99). Through his rhetoric, Malcolm sought to inspire a black rage that would rekindle the embers of black self-love and bring about a psychic transformation leading to self-respect. Malcolm was proud to be known as the "angriest Negro in America" (Malcolm X 1973, 366; cited in Cone 1991, 100).

Malcolm became most critical of Martin when Martin called on blacks to exhibit love by "turning the other cheek" and rejecting violence, even violence in self-defense.<sup>7</sup> Malcolm believed that, as a *person*, one had a moral right to defend one's life, by *any means necessary*. "He did not believe that one could be a *person* without defending his or her life" (Cone 1991, 107–108). Hence, to call on people to renounce this right was to make them nonpersons. Malcolm went so far as to call Martin's teaching of nonviolence "a crime" (Breitman 1970, 9). Malcolm's principled commitment to the right to self-defense was a major obstacle to joining Martin in the civil rights coalition. Many others were willing to commit to nonviolent resistance as a practical tool, even though they were not committed in principle to nonviolence the way Martin was. On principle, Malcolm would not. This makes sense if Malcolm saw nonviolence as an attack on personhood and not just a less effective means to the end of black liberation.

In summary, looking at the goals articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, we see that their disagreements were not just over means to an agreed-upon end. It is true they both sought human freedom and dignity and respect for black people as human beings, but they had substantively different conceptions of what it

was to be fully human and psychologically healthy, hence, of what it was to flourish as a human being. For example, Martin pursued integration because he thought that the self-respect of black people in America depended (in part) on their being accepted as full, participating members of society. Malcolm, on the other hand, saw the desire to integrate into white society as itself symptomatic of black self-hatred, and therefore a sign of psychic damage. As a black person in America one could not intelligibly pursue integration into white society *and* be a self-affirming, self-respecting black person. But because self-respect and self-affirmation are integral features of psychological health, for Malcolm one could not be psychologically healthy and desire integration.

But perhaps the depth of their disagreement is clearest in their respective attitudes to the use of violence in self-defense. Malcolm held that in the nature of what it is to be a person, a human being with moral standing, is the right to freedom and self-defense. He saw the call to repudiate violence in self-defense as dehumanizing. Malcolm was no philosopher, but it is revealing that he called blacks who endorsed Martin's teaching in this regard "subhuman" (Breitman 1970, 87). Malcolm believed that, as a *person*, one had a moral right to defend one's life and freedom, by any means necessary. Martin, on the other hand, held that the nobility of our humanity was revealed precisely in the refusal of violence. To voluntarily "suffer in a righteous cause is to grow to our humanity's full stature," he said (Washington 1986, 487). Whereas Malcolm saw the willingness to use violence in self-defense as an assertion of one's humanity, Martin saw the willingness to use violence as an indication of the true depth of one's despair (Cone 1991, 129).

It is difficult to see how one could judge between these two different visions of psychological health and human flourishing without taking some stand on the questions that underlie Malcolm's and Martin's differences: questions of human nature and what is required for human fulfillment. One might have gut instincts about which of these conceptions is better, or why neither is acceptable, but giving an account of this requires sifting the sorts of considerations that gave the psychologist Kenneth Clark—a friend of both Martin and Malcolm—pause over endorsing either.

On the surface, King's philosophy appears to reflect health and stability, while the black nationalists betray pathology and instability. A deeper analysis, however, might reveal that there is also an unrealistic, if not pathological, basis in King's doctrine. . . . The natural reactions to injustice, oppression, and humiliation are bitterness and resentment. The form which such bitterness takes need not be overtly violent but the corrosion of the human spirit which is involved seems inevitable. It would seem, then, that any demand that the victims of oppression be required to love those who oppress them places an additional and probably intolerable psychological burden upon these victims. (Clark 1969, 36–37)

Clark suspects that Martin's call to love one's enemies is an unrealistic ideal, given human nature. If so, the psychologically healthy response to oppression might rather

be akin to what the psychologists William Grier and Price Cobbs describe in *Black Rage*. Rather than live in a state of depression or dejected resignation, anger manifests the will of the oppressed to overcome. In the view of Grier and Cobbs, “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” (Grier and Cobbs 1968, 209–10; quoted in Tessman 2005, 124). This suggests that those who are advocating rage as a virtue of resistance do not necessarily see it as psychologically harmful. It may rather be taken as a sign of psychological health, constitutive of flourishing rather than opposed to it.

#### IV. EVALUATING THE CONCEPT OF A BURDENED VIRTUE

When Tessman argues that anger of the sort Malcolm called “black rage” is a burdened virtue, she is making two claims. The first is that rage is “virtuous,” that is, morally praiseworthy and appropriate. It is the “ideal” response in the limited sense that it is the best that is possible, given the terrible circumstances. The second is that rage is a “burden,” that is, psychologically unhealthy and incompatible with flourishing. The latter claim is intuitively plausible, and I think that Martin would agree, but of course, he would not accept that rage was a virtue. On the other side, it seems likely that Malcolm would accept that rage is an ideal response to oppression (therefore a virtue), but contrary to Tessman, he does not see it as psychologically harmful.<sup>8</sup> He clearly thinks it is a sign of psychological health. So in Martin’s view anger is psychologically damaging, but not a virtue, whereas in Malcolm’s view anger is a virtue but not psychologically damaging. Tessman’s view is that anger is a virtue, and it is psychologically damaging. Thus, Tessman is not simply adopting the conception of psychological health and flourishing implicit in this liberatory movement. She has her own conception of flourishing by which she is judging that anger is both 1) the best response possible, and 2) psychologically damaging.

Inculcating the burdened virtue of rage can only be the best possible response in these very bad circumstances if Martin is wrong. Martin believes oppression can be overcome through love, and if this is true, then there is an alternative response that is better than rage because it does not involve such terrible consequences for the agent. On the other side, rage is psychologically damaging only if Malcolm is wrong, and rage is not the healthy response. What needs to be true to sustain the claim that rage is a burdened virtue is that rage really is psychologically damaging for human beings, and yet it is the best response possible, given the realistic alternatives. This could be true if Martin’s ideal of love is psychologically unrealistic for most people and setting love of enemy as an ideal is going to backfire in some significant way, for example, in excessive guilt when we fail or in some other kind of pathology.

Considering the ways Tessman both agrees and disagrees with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X about the constituents of psychological health and human flourishing, we can see that Tessman’s argument for the burdened virtues is, so to speak, “cross-pressured.” It is susceptible to critique from two directions. One might deny the existence of burdened virtues either on the grounds that these traits are not the

ideal traits for responding to oppression (and therefore not “virtues”) or on the grounds that the traits that are ideal for responding to oppression are not in fact “burdens” in the way she claims.

What makes a burdened virtue the best trait to cultivate in the situation is not simply the needs of the situation, but the possibilities and limitations provided by our human constitution, in short, human nature. There must be no alternative response that is both realistically possible and better for us, and yet what is possible for us is harmful (as Tessman thinks rage is bound to be). Thus, a certain interpretation of our nature is indispensable for defending Tessman’s claim that a set of character traits exist that are at once the best that is possible for responding to oppression and at the same time regretfully damaging to those who cultivate them.

I have argued that Tessman’s eudaimonism presupposes a certain reading of human nature. What she presupposes is not unreasonable, but neither is it uncontroversially true. One reason Tessman (and others) might wish to avoid such presuppositions is that demonstrating the existence of qualities shared by all human beings is challenging, and thus many are dubious that any such thing as “human nature” exists. I have argued that if rage is to be considered a burdened virtue, our nature must be such that rage is both the best response possible and psychologically damaging. Is it possible that this is not universally true? Maybe an important subset of oppressed persons is capable of sustaining the love called for by Martin Luther King, Jr. without it rebounding in pathology of any serious sort. Or maybe, for an important subset of the oppressed, rage does not lead to rancor and embitterment but is rather healthy and life-affirming, as Malcolm X envisioned.<sup>9</sup>

The consequence of accepting this hypothesis on a broad scale (and not just in the special case of rage) is a rather sophisticated form of relativism. If there is nothing that universally benefits human beings because human beings are so varied in their natures that one individual may be psychologically harmed by a character trait that is benign or even psychologically helpful for another, then there can be no universally valid moral prescriptions about which traits we ought to recommend and which we ought to condemn. We will have to judge on a case-by-case basis what is a “benefit” and what is a “harm,” probably on the basis of each individual’s subjective preferences. I cannot argue against this alternative here, but I would note that there are serious problems with subjectivist theories of well-being (Nussbaum 2000, chap. 2). I take the consequences of refusing to defend the concept of a shared human nature to be much more unpalatable than the admittedly difficult task of defending a plausible (if not unassailable) account of human nature. If one really is unable to accept the supposition of a common humanity, I believe this would be a good reason to reject a eudaimonist perspective and adopt an alternative moral framework with the resources to go beyond the kind of relativism that a eudaimonist perspective is reduced to in its absence.

Why eudaimonism? The conclusion that Tessman ought to embrace more substantive claims about human nature may only be compelling to those committed to eudaimonism on other grounds. Feminist politics, the critique of social injustice, and the critique of oppression inescapably depend on a normative moral perspective. I

cannot argue here that eudaimonism provides the best normative framework for such work, but eudaimonism has several things to recommend it.

First, by articulating a conception of flourishing, a eudaimonist framework offers a vision of the kind of life that feminist politics implicitly seeks to realize. An ethic of flourishing can make this positive vision explicit, make clear the normative basis for moral criticism, and thereby motivate the desired change by articulating an ideal worth striving for.

Second, eudaimonist moral theory can conceptualize oppression as systemic barriers that block flourishing for certain kinds of people. Group-based harms and structural injustice need not be relegated to a second stage of moral analysis that we address after the “basic” issues have been worked out (for example, a theory of right action or the principles governing the basic structure of society). The concept of oppression need not be “tacked on” to a eudaimonist moral framework; it can have a central place in the moral framework, equally basic to attention to individual agents and issues of character.

Finally, there are immediate benefits for Tessman’s eudaimonism in embracing more substantive views on human nature. Tessman would have a clear path for responding to the criticism that her eudaimonist perspective, in admitting burdened virtues as “virtues,” has collapsed into a form of consequentialism. Macalester Bell suggests the only difference between a “burdened virtue” and a “vice” is that the benefits of burdened virtues outweigh the costs (Bell 2006). Thus, Tessman’s “eudaimonist” analysis is really a form of consequentialism, and Tessman seems to concede as much: unlinked from the flourishing of their bearer, the burdened virtues might only be “virtues” because of the valuable states of affairs that they help to realize (Tessman 2005, 166).

With Tessman’s implicit presuppositions about human nature made explicit, we can see that Tessman’s analysis need not reduce to a cost-benefit analysis. It is not simply that the benefits achieved by the burdened virtues in terms of valuable states of affairs outweigh the costs imposed on their bearer. The burdened virtues are “virtues” because they are the best that is possible, *given our nature*. No matter what the cost of these traits, they are still the best that is possible *for us*. What is good is often very difficult to achieve, and striving toward the ideal may be exceedingly demanding. Contexts of oppression create even greater obstacles to realizing what is good. On my view, Tessman’s view can be thoroughly eudaimonist if it prioritizes the well-being of the person and does not justify sacrificing the well-being of the person for the sake of good states of affairs, independent of the person. The burdened virtues call our attention to the costs incurred by individuals even when they possess the best traits that are possible *for them*. Of course, in addition to being eudaimonist, her view is also tragic because, given her understanding of our nature, the best that is possible in a context of oppression is not very good; indeed, the best that is possible is terrible and a form of moral damage.

A theory of human nature turns out to be *crucial* for a eudaimonist conception of flourishing and the virtues. A theory of human nature is indispensable because in the end, whether we think that Martin or Malcolm or Tessman has authentic insight into the ideals that will best promote flourishing, our judgment depends in part on

an assessment of human nature, on what is realistic and what is ideal—what is healthy and what is pathological—for beings such as we are.

## NOTES

1. By “oppression” I mean systemic injustice that affects individuals, not as individuals *per se*, but as members of a group.

2. I interpret Tessman as pursuing, in the main, a strategy of avoidance regarding questions of human nature (Tessman 2005, 51, 59, fn. 8). Tessman does not take an explicit stand on the proper methodological role of human nature, but she does make one important assumption: we are fundamentally social beings. Following Aristotle, Tessman argues we need at least a minimum of other-regarding virtues such as justice, generosity, and loyalty to sustain our collective social life and thereby flourish both individually and socially (Tessman 2005, 70–73; compare Tessman 2008). But Tessman thinks that the needs of our social nature can be fulfilled without the other-regarding virtues being extended to *all others*. One might restrict the exercise of other-regarding virtues to members of one’s own “tribe” (however conceived), and thereby realize the flourishing of an *exclusive* as opposed to an *inclusive* social collectivity (73–76). So, although Tessman rejects the individualistic atomism that would make egoism a real strategy for human flourishing, she must think that a more robustly evaluative conception of human nature as capable of fulfillment only in a genuinely inclusive social order is indefensible. I suspect her goal is to avoid “controversial” claims about human nature, and Aristotelian sociality is so widely accepted—within certain intellectual circles—that she feels entitled to this assumption but not to anything more. As I argue in what follows, I believe her argument for the burdened virtues depends on other more controversial claims about human nature.

3. Toward the end of his life, Malcolm X downplayed the significance of his disagreement with King, calling it a disagreement merely over means and not ends and claiming that he and Martin were in agreement about the goal of black liberation (Breitman 1965/1989, 51). In focusing on their differences, I am not denying that especially toward the end of their lives, Martin moved toward Malcolm and Malcolm moved toward Martin. However, even if Malcolm abandoned the “separatist” position and abjured the rage that powered it, some people remain sympathetic to this kind of view within radical politics. So the distinctive view he articulated in this period remains a live possibility and one worth taking seriously.

4. Although using first names might be disrespectful in other contexts, in comparative analysis, this convention has two virtues. First, it enables me to give fair treatment to the two as equally worthy of consideration for their contribution to the black freedom movement. For instance, consistent reference to “Dr. King” and “Malcolm” would clearly violate the principle of equal respect and fair treatment. This is probably the most extreme possibility, but disparate linguistic treatment carries an implication of inequality. One might simply refer to them by their family names, but this does Malcolm the disservice of employing an “X”—the symbol he adopted to represent his stolen patrimonial inheritance—as his family name. (Born Malcolm Little, Malcolm was given the “X” by Elijah Mohammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam [NoI] when he joined the NoI. The

“X” represented the fact that his true African ancestry was unknown.) Furthermore, I have encountered no treatment of Malcolm X that simply employs the “X.” Referring to both men by their full names would be appropriately respectful, but it has the disadvantage of being cumbersome, and it risks wearing out the reader. Second, it has been suggested in conversation that this convention arose as a way of humanizing these two men, who have been variously demonized or idolized. For these reasons, I’ll follow this convention.

5. Compare Macalester Bell’s suggestion that if we looked at the goals of lesbian separatist feminists and liberal feminists, we would see that they also imply significantly different conceptions of flourishing (Bell 2006).

6. The triadic contrast of integration/nonviolence/love of enemy versus separation/self-defense/self-love that I use to structure this discussion is from Cone 1991, 263, *passim*.

7. Malcolm was insistent that black people should be prepared to defend themselves against violent white aggression, and Malcolm’s rhetoric frequently threatened violent retaliation. But his principles and his rhetoric never translated into action. According to George Breitman, Malcolm never owned the gun or the bullet he called for. See Malcolm’s speech, “The Ballot or the Bullet” (Breitman 1965/1989, 32).

8. A sincere thank you to Theresa Tobin for many stimulating conversations on this topic and for first drawing my attention to this divergence between Tessman’s attitude to rage and Malcolm X’s.

9. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for encouraging me to address this objection.

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