

## Diversifying Syllabi 2015 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

**Article/Essay Title:** “The Burden of Political Resistance,” from *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*

**Author:** Lisa Tessman

**Readability:** Moderate

**Thesis:** The traits that a radical political resister needs to succeed in liberatory struggles, although perhaps sometimes necessary for reducing injustice, may not conduce to the flourishing of the agent herself.

### Key Definitions:

Burdened virtue – character traits that are practically or morally necessary but costly to the possessor

Moral remainder – a “residue” from a moral demand that was overpowered or opted against, the reason for regret in moral dilemmas; in this context, reasons to think some character trait is not unqualifiedly good or is not “ultimately praiseworthy”

Trait guidance v. trait assessment – deciding what character traits one ought to have/cultivate in some set of circumstances v. question of what traits are part of good and flourishing life

Mixed trait – trait that is morally praiseworthy but disconnected from agent’s well-being

Chronic anger – perhaps important to distinguish ‘chronic anger’ in this usage from usage in vernacular—both long-term, but no sense in which it is necessarily irrational, unjustified, compulsive, or a disorder

First-/second-level anger – see summary

### Brief Summary

**Overview of book as a whole:** Using virtue ethics to examine the ways in which liberatory struggles “both limit and burden [the] moral goodness” of resisters. Oppression can create moral damage—preventing individuals from exercising some virtues. More relevantly, it can call for a different set of character traits, which cannot be unambivalently morally praised. Chapter 1 argues that although political resisters must sometimes aim for personal transformation (as a way of resisting dominant values), constitutive moral luck is possible and agent-regret about one’s character is possible. Chapter 2 argues that, despite the pragmatic danger of highlighting how victims of oppression may be morally damaged, it is important because it opens up space to think about what traits could be recommended to resisters. Chapter 3 argues for adding a restriction to eudaimonistic theory, to ensure that morality requires attention to subordinated people: viz., that a trait cannot be morally praiseworthy if it detracts from flourishing of inclusive social collectivity. (This is meant to explain why the privileged in oppressive societies are barred from flourishing.) Chapter 4 argues that in conditions of oppression, there is no perfectly adequate balance point between attention to the needs of others and self-care—there will always be some “moral remainder.” This introduces the idea of a burdened virtue. Chapter 5 extends this discussion to the ideal of the radical political resister. Chapter 6 argues that loyalty may be detrimental to the resister and (perhaps) to liberatory ends, insofar as it can obstruct the critique that is necessary to overcoming oppression.

## Summary of Chapter 5

- ❖ Claim: The actual character traits of the political resister (who is an admirable type for liberatory movements) may not be connected with the resister's own flourishing (107).
  - This requires revision of virtue-ethics theory: typically Aristotelian virtues are sources of well-being.
  - Tessman introducing idea of burdened virtues—traits that are practically or morally necessary but costly to its possessor (mixed traits, like Aristotelian mixed actions).
  - This possibility also identifies another harm of oppressive conditions.
  
- ❖ Set-up of how this fits into eudaimonistic theories.
  - Virtue may be disjoined from flourishing, even apart from common acknowledgment of insufficiency of virtue for flourishing (109).
  - Aristotelian mixed actions (in dilemmatic or suboptimal circumstances) are voluntary in one sense but would never be chosen outside certain circumstances.
  - Borrowing from Michael Stocker: some mixed acts (like doing base deeds to save family from tyrant) *tell against* eudaimonia—base acts may make eudaimonia impossible.
  - Also possible for such unlucky circumstances to erode good character. Misfortune can damage ability to trust, foster cynicism, cowardice, small-mindedness.
  - Borrowing from Nussbaum on fragility of virtue. Rather than focus on sources of vulnerability in nature of virtue itself, Tessman looks at bad luck caused by injustice/conditions of oppression.
  - Political resisters more likely to have to navigate dirty hands cases—led to commit certain acts because of unjust circumstances.
  - Political resisters also pressured to develop certain traits needed for fighting injustice.
    - Perhaps not universal to all political resisters—see Civil Rights movement endorsement of nonviolence and shaming through retention of moral integrity.
    - More of an issue for militant and radical resistance
  
- ❖ Description of the ideal of the radical/militant political resister (114).
  - Not all traits of this ideal are potentially harmful to flourishing: resistance to denigration of despised groups and revaluation, cultivated lack of consumerist desire.
  - Three sets of traits that could endanger flourishing
    - Traits involved in developing and maintaining a “hard resolve”
    - Traits that allow for risk-taking and personal sacrifice
    - Traits of radical group members (mostly elaboration of Maoist auto-critique; potential for shaming or exclusion)
  
- ❖ How anger connects to these problematic traits (116).
  - Positive appraisal of anger as part of ideal of radical resister
    - Part of ideal of radical resister (may have to be cultivated, sometimes in tension with natural compassion)
      - Audre Lorde: anger as source of strength, motivation
      - Marilyn Frye: in feminist politics, embracing anger way of resisting sexist norms
    - Tendency toward compassion reflects traits that would enable flourishing under non-oppressive circumstances
    - Anger as refusal to accept subordination and call for respect as equal (borrowing from Elizabeth Spelman)
      - Suggestion that there may be an imperative to be angry
    - Positive epistemic value of anger—those subject to injustices and “chronically” angry may be “hypersensitive” and situated so as to better perceive injustices

- The burdens of oppositional anger
  - Aristotle treats chronic anger as character flaw
  - Oppositional anger threatens to hit the wrong target
    - Lorde’s discussion of black women directing anger at self and other black women—danger of anger combined with internalized oppressive norms
    - Misdirected anger a danger because easier to express anger toward the less powerful
    - Issue of intersectionality—agents of oppression often also victims
  - Oppositional anger may be incompatible with Aristotelian recommendations about moderation in degree of anger
    - María Lugones’s distinction between first-level anger (communicative, seeks uptake from addressee) and second-level anger (not understandable from within existing “world of sense”)
    - May be a place for anger that would be seen as unreasonable or immoderate
    - Alternatively, enormous and lasting anger may be required if one is defective for ignoring insults
  - The “moral remainder” of oppositional anger: chronic anger still regrettable to the degree it is bad for the bearer
    - A “mixed trait”—morally praiseworthy but disconnected from agent’s well-being
  
- ❖ How courage connects to these problematic traits (125).
  - Resistance to oppression calls for extraordinary courage; courage risks self-sacrifice; courage in these circumstances can be burdensome.
  - May be a problem with the ideal of the political resister (“masculinist, military model”)
  - Nevertheless, something dilemmatic: morally condemnable to run from fight against injustice, burdensome if accepted
  
- ❖ Quick conclusion (129)
  - Politically resistant self may be healthiest self possible under oppression, but that doesn’t mean resistance “is psychologically healthy and promotes flourishing”
  - Introduces distinction between “trait guidance” and “trait assessment”—can separate out question of what traits one should cultivate in certain circumstances from question of what traits are connected to the good/flourishing life
    - May be correct to maintain chronic anger even if anger is not an unproblematic good
  - Tessman sees her argument as starting conversation on how to resist, taking into consideration potential for burden

### **Possible Applications:**

- ❖ Bring out relevance of Aristotle/Virtue theory
- ❖ Highlight tension between right action and the good life
- ❖ Ideal/nonideal theory and application problems of moving from theory to ‘action’
- ❖ Guidance vs. assessment talk is useful as background, or could use this to lead into that topic
- ❖ Definitely fits into a topic of political emotions and anger.
- ❖ Works with Anger in political resistance literature.
- ❖ Works in a course about moral emotions or social philosophy

### **Complementary Texts/Resources:**

- ❖ Some suggestions from Tessman's citations:
  - Nussbaum 1986,
  - Lorde 1984,
  - Meyers 1997
  
- ❖ Other texts relevant to resisting oppression:
  - Daniel Silvermint, "Resistance and well-being"
  - Carol Hay, "The obligation to resist oppression" (Kantian perspective)
  - Ann Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*
  - Also, check scholars from this conference: <http://ethics-etc.com/2013/08/22/workshop-on-the-duty-to-resist-oppression-at-uconn/>
  
- ❖ Other texts on anger and other emotions:
  - Michael Stocker,
  - Martha Nussbaum,
  - Rosalind Hursthouse,
  - Myisha Cherry,
  - Bernard Boxill,
  - Karen Jones

#### **Possible Class Activities:**

- ❖ Analyze the many political resistance movements like Black Lives Matter, and others.
  - Check out: <http://aaihs.org/resources/charlestonsyllabus/>
- ❖ Compare with Buddhism and its approach to compassion with mass suffering.
- ❖ Send students to protest!
- ❖ Activity on anger and epistemological accuracy. Can you be both full of passion and clear-headed?

#### **What traditional texts might this text replace?**

- ❖ Could replace other exemplars of contemporary Aristotelianism, such as MacIntyre.
- ❖ Some parts of Aristotle itself, though they need some background in the theory before Tessman, in particular need a picture of Eudamonia, and also the virtues.
  - Perhaps use Tamar Gendler intro to Aristotle video lectures
- ❖ Other discussions of how the good life and virtues are supposed to happily go together (or not: Kant).
- ❖ Also just a good way to jazz up a normal unit on Aristotle.