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“Guilt, Love, and What We Want”

Commentary on Anita Superson’s “Privilege, Immorality, and Responsibility for Attending to the “Facts About Humanity.”

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In her essay, "Privilege, Immorality, and Responsibility for Attending to the 'Facts about Humanity,'" Anita Superson cogently and persuasively argues that those privileged by sexism have moral obligations to attend to the humanity of those oppressed by it. For Superson, it is quite important that the privileged attend in this way: "denying women's basic humanity," Superson writes, "is at the root of all women's oppression" (48). And "if men do not see this, or deny it, or disregard it, or do not care about it, there remains little or no hope of eradicating women's oppression" (48). Superson is particularly concerned, I think, about failures to see and to care, about denials and disregardings, that stem from complacency; we especially need, I think she is saying,

conceptual resources to take to task the mass of complacent beneficiaries of privilege.

It is hard not to agree with Superson's central claims. There is surely something morally objectionable about ignoring anyone's humanity, and something especially wrong about doing it in a way that sustains systematic oppression. Superson is surely right that systems of privilege, like sexism and racism, foster complacent arrogance, self-centeredness, and denial of responsibility among the privileged, and that these character defects are intimately bound up with failures to attend to others' humanity (36-38). Women, of course, are human, both in general and in the specific senses crucial for the Kantian argument Superson wants to make: women share with other human beings capacities for rational end-setting or autonomy (34, 43, 48), and also share the fact of individuality, of being beings whose ends reflect both unique circumstances and a "unique set of interests, desires, plans and goals" (47). Superson is surely wise to turn to Kant, whom she employs elegantly and powerfully, arguing that anyone who demands respect for himself and his capacities and the ends he has set using them (which is something everyone should demand) is required, on pain of irrationality and immorality, to grant the same respect to women and our capacities and ends (42-47). Superson's quarry is at hand: fully respecting women's humanity (rationality, autonomy, end-setting, individuality) involves understanding and respecting women's 'subject position' under sexism, which requires men to develop sensitivities and to "step out of their privilege" so they can "come to see things from the perspective of the oppressed" (48). Add to this an argument that such understanding is, in principle, possible for the privileged (48-51), and Superson's case against the complacent sexist is neatly made.

Two things, however, nagged at me. First, as I think Superson herself acknowledges, many sexist acts and attitudes – acts and attitudes Superson wants to condemn as

failures to attend to others' humanity – depend in fact on a fairly well-developed understanding of women's humanity. Superson's "malignantly wicked," for instance, understand women: in order to pursue misogynist programs of insulting our humanity, obscuring it so others won't notice it, and even throwing us into self-doubt about it, they need, as Superson acknowledges, to 'appreciate' women's humanity quite well (39-40, 51). It is a myth, I think, that oppression stems from dehumanization. Dehumanization is a key *tactic* of oppression, but those seriously invested in oppressing others are invested in oppressing them, even in annihilating them, *because and insofar as they are* human beings. (When people say they prefer 'old-fashioned' racists or sexists to guilt-wracked liberals, it may in part be because open enemies at least take our humanity on, while those unconscious of their own racism or sexism are liable to come at us in ways that more creepily erase our humanity.) The point is this: if there are, as I think there are, privilege-sustaining acts and attitudes that *don't* stem from a failure to appreciate the humanity of the oppressed, Superson's argument will perhaps cover fewer cases than she hoped.

Superson has a reply here. The Kantian argument she makes entitles her to insist not only on appreciation or understanding, but also on respect – which is precisely what she does when discussing the "malignant," for instance. And in any event, Superson's central targets, as I suggested at the outset, seem to me not the "malignant," but the complacent, the ones who just go along, benefiting from privilege but refusing to see themselves as beneficiaries, arrogating to themselves the right to say what is normal, ignoring or writing-off the voices around them that say anything different. These are the ones whose feet are not often held to moral fire, who are excused as no better and no worse than the mass of privileged people around them, none of whom is singled out for condemnation as racist or sexist, since all of them are similarly afflicted (how many times have you heard

Kant's (for instance) racism and sexism excused in this way?). Superson wants arguments to get at them precisely, I think, because they are the ones who always seem to slither out of moral accountability.

But this is where the second thing that nagged at me starts to emerge. As Kant and others who think about kinds of duty and obligation would note, duties to attend to the facts of humanity must be considered 'imperfect.' No one can be obligated to attend to all the facts about humanity all the time (what would this even mean?); as a result, individuals necessarily have discretion about how exactly to go about fulfilling the duty. For this reason, my obligation to fulfill the duty does not correspond to a right on anyone else's part to demand fulfillment here, now: because I have discretion, no one has the right to call on me for any specific act of attending. This makes the duty 'imperfect' or incomplete. My duty not to lie, in contrast, is 'perfect' – you have the moral right to insist that I never deceive you (which of course includes that I not deceive you here, now). Imperfect duties are no less serious than perfect ones, but they do take us out of the terrain of strict adherence to rules, and into the project of cultivating character virtues (attentiveness, for instance). Onora O'Neill has made this point, as has Kant himself (O'Neill 2000; Kant [1797] 1991, Ak. 391-95). Superson calls on us to develop the virtues of seeing and hearing and appreciating and respecting others, even when they are not like us and even when seeing and hearing and appreciating and respecting goes against our own immediate interests. The privileged have duties to come to understand the systematic nature of oppression, and to investigate the ways privilege functions in their own and others' lives, and to commit themselves to fighting oppression, which entails, among other things, doing what they need to do to more fully grasp the humanity of others; the privileged have duties to become better, bigger, more compassionate, more beneficent,

more respectful, attentive, loving human beings – but these are imperfect duties.

This may be fine with Superson, may perhaps be taken as a friendly amplification. Nothing here is strictly inconsistent with the philosophical support she offers for efforts at holding the privileged morally responsible. Moreover, as anyone who has tried to work much with the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties knows, the distinction doesn't always apply easily to real duties. But it still points here, I think, to something useful. Noticing the imperfection of the moral obligations at issue, and noticing consequently that these obligations are obligations to virtue, seems to me to point up a mismatch. Superson has given us a tight philosophical apparatus for assigning blame, but the apparatus calls for virtues, underwriting a project less like blame and more like seeking and cultivating conditions for understanding, compassion, friendship, respect, and even love.

This is what nagged. I finished Superson's article with a sense of having been freshly deputized to distribute moral blame, to hold more feet to more fires. Of course, many of us already do routinely – and rightly – accuse the privileged of immoral disregard for others, but this is no objection: providing philosophical support for our existing moral practices and intuitions is something philosophers have always done, and it is a fine thing to do (it is all Kant, for instance, claimed to be doing). The question is just whether entitlement to blame gets us closer to what we really want, or at least what I think Superson really wants. She wants the privileged to stop being arrogant, self-centered, in defensive denial, and to begin to be friendly, loving, open, willing to put their egos aside long enough to notice the terms of our lives and to join us in eradicating women's oppression. Superson cites María Lugones's conception of world-traveling as a model for what we want the privileged to do (48; citing

Lugones 2003). World-traveling can engender 'loving perception,' fuller and more caring understanding of where others stand. But as Superson herself notes, productive world-traveling, "can only be done out of friendship, not obligation" (48; and see Lugones 2003, 81). If this is so, arguments that assign moral blame or point up failures – that reiterate obligations, that press duties – do not feel to me that helpful.

What would be helpful? I have nothing new to suggest, just old familiar strategies for combating oppression: job and educational opportunities, progressive school curricula, a reliable social safety net, a just legal system, etc. – the whole familiar social infrastructure that fosters more egalitarian communities, coaxes the virtues at issue here, and has been known to make significant dents in racist and sexist systems of oppression. I am eager to hear what Superson thinks.

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