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RACE, LUCK, AND THE MORAL EMOTIONS

Samantha Vice

Introduction

However we understand “race”, our own racial classification has a deep connection to our identity and character, and to our prospects and success in the world. How should we think about this aspect of ourselves? Even if we repudiate racial classifications for the damage they have done or hope for a non-racial future, we are racially classified now whether we like it or not. Race might not be biologically real but it is socially real for all that. This chapter explores whether there are better and worse ways—more or less virtuous ways—of responding to our racial identity.

In this complex debate, I need to set out some basic commitments at the start. First, I speak of “virtuous responses” and “character” in a way that should be compatible with any moral theory of right and wrong action. My concern is with a normative inquiry that is focused on character rather than action, and in particular, with our evaluations of a person’s character as more or less appropriate and praiseworthy—that is what I shall mean by “virtuous.” I say nothing about whether a “virtue ethics” should replace or supplement traditional theories of right and wrong action. Aristotle’s notion of a (virtuous) character is still useful and standard: the set of stable and reliable dispositions to act, think, and feel in certain ways, which are responsive to practical reason (1953: Bk 2). Unlike “personality,” a term we usually use to pick out the idiosyncratic features which distinguish us from one another, “a virtuous character” picks out traits that express the excellences characteristic of humans per se. In this chapter, I focus on the whole on our emotional responses to our own racialized, more or less virtuous characters, though as we shall see, assessing those requires reference to our cognitive responses to our situation.

Second, although I look at both blacks’ and whites’ responses to their racialized characters, when it comes to disentangling the ethical implications I am mostly concerned with the responses of whites. This carries the risk of putting white people at the center of ethical inquiry, where they have been for far too long, to disastrous effect. My reasons for concentrating on white experience yet again are personal, philosophical, and ethical: personally, it is uncomfortable and probably inappropriate to make comments on how those in another racial position should feel, especially when I speak from a position of privilege. On the whole, therefore, I speak as a white person about whites’ emotional responses, and when I make a claim about blacks’ responses, I am calling on

black writers. The philosophical issues explored here of course have general features, but I hope to show that the position of whites brings with it distinctive puzzles about responsibility, luck, and identity. Being black will bring its own puzzles in this domain, but I leave this to others to explore. Ethically, whiteness has created plenty of opportunities to evade responsibility for a racially unjust world, so whites' sense of being basically decent people is more at stake.

Finally, I use the label "black" in the inclusive political sense still standard in post-apartheid South African political and theoretical discourse, to refer to a variety of identities that have occupied an inferior racial position. So in this inclusive sense, "black" applies to people of various ethnic and national origins—African; Afro-Caribbean, and South Asian in the UK; African Americans and Asian Americans, American Indians, and Latino/as, in the United States; people of mixed race. Particular black identities may have significantly different racial experiences, but "black" is still a politically and morally powerful category.

Race and Luck

A crucial aspect of this exploration is that whether we are black or white, privileged or not, most of us have no control over the way we are racially classified in a racialized world. Unless we are able to pass for another race, our race is not something we can opt out of, and conscious attempts to do so usually lead to debilitating psychological contortions and fraught relations. (On passing, see Piper 1992; and consider the controversial case of Rachel Dolezal, the ex-president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane, Washington, a white woman who identifies as black, and who successfully passed as black until her dramatic exposure in 2015). I may not personally identify with what "whiteness" means, for example, and I might want to repudiate that identity, but in this world I am white and am treated as white. For most of us, our race has enormous implications for our lives, inclining them in a certain direction and into a certain shape from birth. Our race provides us with a greater or lesser array of options from which we can create, develop and understand our adult selves, and it brings attendant advantages and disadvantages. Being born black in apartheid South Africa meant that many options were automatically foreclosed, that your future was radically restricted in more than just legal ways. That is an extreme example, but blacks in most parts of the world still lead far less flourishing lives than their white fellow citizens, with violence, incarceration, and poverty blighting many lives. On the other hand, the undoubted social, political, and economic privilege of whiteness can be double-edged and bring its own burdens, as José Medina (2013) shows: those cushioned in the blindness and arrogance of privilege often lack the skills and insight which the less privileged are forced to acquire and which often put them in at least a better epistemic position. The luck of being born black or white therefore has pervasive consequences, negative and positive, for all aspects of our lives.

Race is also, to use the influential terms introduced by Bernard Williams (1981) and Thomas Nagel (1979), a matter of *moral* luck (for a survey of the debate, see Nelkin 2013). Even though our race is not under our control—and hence is a matter of luck—it has implications that are in the realm of normativity. It greatly influences who we become and we still seem to be responsible for our characters and lives; they seem appropriate objects of moral evaluation. The extent of the influence of race on our characters may not be apparent to us and we may need to learn it for ourselves, or be

“conscientized” by others into an understanding of race’s meaning (as whiteness studies and black consciousness movements attempt to do). It may be easy to understand and sympathize with some of the morally problematic character traits that arise out of being a certain race, and sometimes we may not be blamed for them. For instance, the unconscious adoption of white standards by some blacks, and the shame that accompanies not living up to them, is understandable but still morally problematic. We do not blame them, but we still evaluate their lives as worse than they could be. In contrast, the complacency and arrogance that typically accompanies being white does not seem to be excused by whites’ lack of control over their race; we judge that they are answerable for these traits and that they should try to change them. Whether or not people are open to blame, then, they can still be held responsible for the characters that race might have influenced, and for at least some of their effects in the world.

So it is a matter of luck that we are born white or black in a racist world, but a matter of moral luck that our character is influenced by our race. Despite talk of luck, however, the general patterns of influence of race on our lives are not accidental—in this world we are from birth enmeshed in systems of privilege, opportunities and deprivations. Claudia Card calls the results of this system the “unnatural lottery” (1996, after Rawls 1973), which Lisa Tessman (2005: 13) explains as those “circumstances that are systematically arranged and that tend to affect people as members of social groups.” The unnatural lottery affects our characters in patterned ways that can be explained by our position in those non-accidental systems. We can call the luck that affects character formation “constitutive luck” (after Williams 1981 and Nagel 1979), and the luck coming from the unnatural lottery “systemic luck” (Tessman 2005: 13). The most relevant kind of luck for our purposes is, then, a combination of systemic and constitutive luck. My being white may not be under my original control, but the fact that *I*, because white, was influenced in certain ways and became recognizably a certain kind of person is something we can explain and predict given white supremacy. The character traits *I* then develop under these systematic conditions are open to moral assessment.

Of course—and as we shall see, this makes the issue tremendously tricky—each one of us is not only what systemic constitutive luck has made of us. Race does not exhaust our identity; it does not exhaust what can be said of us, nor how we can be evaluated. Each one of us is far more than this. We may display types of traits that can be correlated with occupying a particular position in a racialized world, but we are each also individuals, and this can unsettle easy categorizations. Some of us might escape the patterns of character development and life trajectories that the unnatural lottery predicts for us; some might struggle for years to overcome them. It is a symptom of a *racist*, and not just racialized, world to treat people as only, or essentially, their race. These two thoughts—that we are importantly what our racial positions have made us, and that we are also importantly more than this or, sometimes, not this—complicate the “moral” dimension of moral luck. They complicate the kind of assessment and range of responses we think is appropriate towards ourselves and others as black or white. I will explore this complexity after setting out a framework for understanding the emotions.

The Moral Emotions and Responsibility

My concern in this chapter is with how we respond emotionally to our own characters in the light of racial luck, and with what those self-directed responses, in turn,

express about ourselves. To have a character is to respond to ourselves and the world in patterned and stable ways that express our core commitments. At the same time, our characters are partly constituted by the way we respond, and we can develop or change ourselves insofar as we can change those emotional responses. The influence between character and emotion therefore goes both ways.

The view in this chapter assumes that we have some significant control over our characters and emotional responses, and that they are appropriate objects of moral assessment. I will not say too much about responsibility for character. Skepticism about responsibility here would undermine our most basic moral practices: One of the ongoing and arduous tasks of an ethical life is to develop and improve one's character, and a moral community is constituted by moral agents who are answerable to each other not only for what they do but also, in certain respects, for the kinds of people they are. As Peter Goldie (2004: chapter 4) notes, character traits are reason-responsive—generous people, for example, respond to reasons for being generous which the parsimonious fail to see or heed.

The very notion of the moral emotions also includes reason-responsiveness and brings moral evaluation with it. The moral emotions are those that respond to, incorporate, or express moral assessments—examples are shame, guilt, and remorse; resentment, indignation, and bitterness; certain kinds of pride and praise; self-satisfaction and esteem of others. For example, most of us will feel shame if we do something that falls below the standards we accept for ourselves and that reflects badly on ourselves. If we do something we accept to be morally wrong, we feel guilt or remorse for our actions, even if our sense of our basic decency remains relatively unscathed (Taylor 1985). We can resent our weaknesses and take pride in our achievements; we can hold ourselves in contempt, or be gentle with ourselves. Our experiencing or not experiencing these emotions is also open to the moral assessment of others, who can judge emotions to be uncalled for, or commendable, and who can hold to account those who fail to feel remorse or are utterly shameless in circumstances that warrant it.

One mark of the emotions, however, seems to be their passivity, their not being directly “up to us.” We cannot just choose to feel ashamed, or proud, or grateful. How, then, can our feeling them reflect well or badly on ourselves? We could wish that they weren't the way they are, certainly, but it hardly seems fair that *we* be evaluated for having them. While it is true that we cannot, on the spot, choose how we feel, emotions are not simply sensations like pain or itchiness, or instinctual reactions like disgust or being startled. Most philosophers agree that the emotions have some kind of cognitive dimension, though they differ greatly in the details. We need not hold the strong view that emotions are essentially beliefs or judgments to accept that emotions are directed at something, that they are *intentional* states that respond to and inform us about the world, and are therefore in the realm of reasons. (Cognitive theories of the emotions can take many forms; see de Sousa 2014 and Deonna and Teroni 2012 for helpful surveys.) If our beliefs, perceptions or evaluations of the world change, usually—and properly—so do our emotions. If they do not, we think the situation odd or pathological or at least unfortunate. An emotion which proves impervious to change—an *idée fixe*—we judge to be inappropriate precisely because it is insensitive to the very evidence that would undermine it. About our emotions, then, we can ask a range of questions that show their reason-responsiveness: Are they based on false beliefs? Are they out of proportion to reality? Are they (or do they include) faulty perceptions or assessments

of the situation? More deeply, we can ask about the kinds of temperament, attitudes, or character that they express: are they expressions of a fundamental malice, pessimism, or generosity, for instance? These are all questions we can ask of ourselves and of others. Even if we cannot immediately change them, and even if initially we simply find ourselves with an emotion, in the light of this cognitive dimension it is most of the time possible to change or slowly eradicate our emotions by changing our assessments, perceptions or beliefs, and by working longer term on our characters.

I will assume for this chapter, too, that the assessment of our emotions is moral and not only broadly ethical or rational. That is, we assess our emotions not just as valuable or good to have, or as fortunate or unfortunate, and not just as rational or irrational, but as appropriate in a deontic sense—meriting esteem, blame, or censure, rather than simply repulsion or admiration. We can be held accountable for them before others and we can be morally wrong in how we feel, not just irrational or lacking some other value. Even though I cannot immediately—just like that—stop feeling resentful or guilty, I can be morally assessed for what I do with those emotions and for how I work on them. So this chapter accepts that there is such a thing as moral luck (not an uncontroversial assumption—see Nelkin 2013: §4), and accepts that we can be morally evaluated for our characters and for having, or failing to have, certain emotions, even though they are only indirectly under our control.

We can give some defense of this framework by noting a point that I will return to, that there are other aspects of ourselves that are not under our control but that we still assess morally—our natural temperament, dispositions, and abilities, for instance. If we exempt emotional responses from evaluation because we find ourselves with them, so, too, will a range of other evaluations have to be jettisoned. Understanding why it matters that our emotional reactions be a certain way will also partly justify this framework. One reason it matters is that our emotional dispositions are a defining part of our characters—we are irascible, or optimistic, or shameless, or generous, and this tells us something important about who we are and, if we are at all self-reflective, we think it can reflect well or badly on ourselves. It probably does not say everything morally important about us (we might, for instance, do what we take to be right without feeling inclined and with no emotion, and that can be praiseworthy), but it is a familiar and deep aspect of ourselves and moral evaluation. Finally, and as I go on to explore, we might think that if we do not have certain emotional moral responses then our understanding is lacking too, and we display both a moral and epistemic failure.

Race and the Moral Emotions

What, then, are the range of emotional responses that apply to our sense of self as white or black, and, more particularly, to our understanding of ourselves as racially privileged or oppressed, in light of the constitutive and systemic luck involved in these identities? And how do we ethically assess these responses?

Moral agents who recognize injustice and unfair privilege would naturally respond with some degree of emotion, even if it is not sustained at a high pitch (it probably could not be without risking mental health and, as Tessman explores (2005: chapter 4), part of virtue is finding the “mean” between indifference and a self-destructive immersion in suffering). We would feel some anger and sadness towards the injustices of the world, even if only when we dwell consciously on them or our attention is demanded

by circumstances. Further, recognition of the long-lasting and damaging systems that we all find ourselves inhabiting (some comfortably, others painfully), seems to call for certain responses towards ourselves as well.

It seems plausible to say—though, as we shall see, it is certainly not uncontroversial—that whites should feel some kind of discomfort even if they have not performed any obviously racist acts. I will explore this claim throughout the chapter, but we can give some schematic reasons in support of it to begin with. First, white people belong to a group that is responsible for the atrocities of slavery and, in South Africa, for apartheid, the socio-economic effects of which are still felt. As members of the group, most of them benefit from that history and from the ongoing unjust distribution of resources that is its legacy. While a full defense of the claim that whites are still beneficiaries of racial injustice would require empirical evidence, the claim is plausible enough to be an assumption in the rest of this chapter. (One piece of evidence is that the percentage of whites living in poverty in South Africa is less than 1%.) Second, the injustice of the current distribution is maintained over generations as already privileged whites pass down their goods to their descendants; and so third, it could be said that white privilege is gained and maintained at the expense of others.

Fourth, privilege is not only material. Whites are favored in all sorts of subtle and not so subtle ways (McIntosh 1988), and are protected from the everyday dangers and annoyances that accompany many black lives. Furthermore, most whites will display habitual, often unconscious, ways of being in the world that Marilyn Frye (1992) influentially terms “whitely” (and see Sullivan 2006; McIntosh 1988; Matthews 2012). These habits, which are as clear to non-whites as they are often invisible to whites, demonstrate their ease in a world that continuously accommodates and validates them. For example, whites assume that their way is the universal way of being, are confident in their abilities and future success, and assume that things will go their way. Many whites will also be whitely, even if they do not perform crudely racist acts or say blatantly racist things. And once this is brought to their attention, most will not be happy to recognize those habits in themselves.

The target of our discomfort can be difficult to put a finger on, however. Some of the habits mentioned above are not problematic in themselves (e.g., confidence and expectation of success), and many of the goods that whites enjoy routinely should accrue to everyone (Gordon 2004: 175; Blum 2008: 310). In a world without systemic inequalities, much of what we think of as privilege now would simply be what is due to all of us as moral agents and citizens. Our discomfort, then, must have something to do with the thought that whites’ ease of being is at the expense of others’ discomfort or relegation, and with the complacency that they take towards their good luck. Some of the “privilege” of white privilege is therefore only negative in a context of racial inequality, and it is in this negative sense that I will use the term.

It also seems plausible to say that blacks would appropriately feel not only anger, resentment, or bitterness at white people and at their disadvantaged position in a white supremacist world, but also emotions towards themselves as positioned in that system—sadness for possibilities they might never experience, a need to come to terms with a life that is not how it could have been, mourning a loss of trust in others and the constant vigilance needed to avoid trouble. Someone might also recognize in himself problematic habits of behavior and thought. He might not like, for instance, the fact that he defers to whites or unthinkingly accepts their judgments about himself, and this might

occasion shame. He has fallen below his own reflectively endorsed standard of not deferring to white standards, even as they still influence him. Such negative emotions need not always be debilitating and inappropriate. They can, for example, be mobilized by leaders in social justice movements, as they arguably were in South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement (Biko 1987), and thus be put in the service of justice. If they are turned outwards and responsibly guided, they can be instrumentally valuable, and so ensure that blacks do not become indirect agents of whiteness themselves by satisfying white norms. However, many also feel understandable, yet ultimately *inappropriate* emotions of self-contempt, hopelessness, or shame, which are grounded in their acceptance of the standards of the privileged. An important part of the liberation struggle for blacks has been to understand and change those negative self-directed emotions (Fanon 2008).

At the least, then, we do not condemn self-directed negative responses of some kind from whites. In contrast, while we understand that blacks might also, perhaps unconsciously, be harsh towards themselves, we judge those feelings to be sadly inappropriate when they are not utilized for the ends of justice. (I have these cases in mind in what follows.) We seem to have reached an uncontroversial and perhaps banal conclusion: negative and judgmental emotional responses to the self *qua* privileged are appropriate, but to the self in a less privileged position they are not, and this is because of the badness of oppression and privilege. Those in the non-privileged position should not be harsh towards themselves. They are in a morally bad position because their flourishing and dignity is undermined, but it is not morally bad in the sense of their being perpetrators or beneficiaries of injustice. Those in a privileged position should at least feel discomfort about themselves *qua* privileged because privilege is morally bad, because they benefit in systematic and predictable ways that contribute to reinforcing injustice.

Which moral emotions would be appropriate to whites' compromised position? Shannon Sullivan (2006) reminds us of the difficulty of eradicating whitely habits, many of which operate without our awareness. For many in South Africa, habits of whiteness and the racism inherited from apartheid are difficult to recognize, let alone dislodge. They will sometimes be expressed as fairly straightforward racism, even though whites may be unaware of it and even though they might express their disapproval of racism. Coming to realize that their own behavior is racist, when they know that racism is considered wrong, would naturally lead to guilt; realizing that *they* are racists would lead to shame. Those whites who are not racist in an obvious sense, but who are aware of their ingrained whitely habits and who try actively to resist them, present a more complicated case. Perhaps, minimally, they would feel something akin to what Williams (1981) calls agent-regret. For Williams, this is regret for being part of a causal chain that resulted in harm, even if one had no control over it and did no wrong intentionally. We would not judge a person generously if she felt nothing in such unfortunate circumstances. Similarly, it is appropriate that whites should at least regret their fortunate position in a structure that perpetuates racial injustice, even though being in that position is a matter of bad moral luck. More strongly, and controversially, perhaps it would be fitting for them to feel *shame*: we cannot approve of the habits of whiteness when they are pointed out to us—we do not want to be those kinds of complacent and arrogant people. We do not want to perpetuate an unjust system from a position of privilege, and flourish at the expense of those less privileged in that system. In both these respects, we are falling below our own standards for virtue (Vice 2010). Finally, perhaps *guilt* for

flourishing at the expense of others would also be appropriate. Not actively resisting an unjust regime, continuing to enjoy its fruits, and passing them down to the next generation, are also plausible grounds for guilt: “I am guilty by virtue of my relationship to wrongdoing, a relationship that I did not create but have not severed either,” Sandra Lee Bartky writes (1999: 41). She notes that this means rejecting the intuitive link between guilt and intentional wrong-doing: “one can be guilty *without having done anything wrong*” (Bartky 1999: 41; and see Vice 2010). Insofar as whites might not be able fully to escape their entanglement with injustice—merely by being white, the world accommodates them—some uncomfortable emotions might be something they have to live with.

Some such painful emotions are the natural and proper responses to a deepening understanding of a racialized world in which one is privileged, and so have “an affective dimension that is inextricable from a cognitive dimension” (Bartky 1999: 40). Feeling them expresses one’s understanding of the situation; so we can see how they are intentional, reason-responsive states, directed towards a phenomenon evaluated as bad. They also express something about the kind of person one is—for instance, that one has enough sense of justice to respond with pain to the recognition of one’s privileged, unearned position. On the other hand, if one is the recipient of injustice one can certainly feel pain *for oneself*—and coming to terms with one’s position might require acknowledging it—but hardly pain *at oneself*. A racialized and racist world is bad for one and not sought out.

These conclusions strike me as plausible and correct, and I want to retain them. However, matters become more complex once we recall moral luck. We have accepted that privilege is attendant on being white, and disadvantage attendant on not being white, and over the origins of neither racial identities do we have control. On the view so far, moral luck is *asymmetrical*: the luck of being white brings with it appropriately negative self-directed emotions, but the luck of being born black does not. The fact of luck, therefore, does not warrant only one set of responses, but is *asymmetrical*. We thought earlier that this was banally true, but perhaps it is not true, or at least not banally so. Could a white person not say, “I’m sorry about the injustices of the world, but I didn’t choose to be white and I have no control over the fact of being white. I will certainly avoid actively being unjust or racist myself; I will try to change my whitely habits and I will try to contribute to social justice where I can. I am as unhappy and angry with the state of the world as you are. But it is not my fault and there is no reason for me to feel bad about *myself*.” Just as the black person did not choose her position, nor did the white person, and if self-directed negative emotions are inappropriate in the one case, so are they in the other. I shall call this the “symmetry response.” Note that it does not say that whites need not feel any emotions about the racialized world they inhabit and benefit from, only that they need not feel *self-directed* negative emotions.

The apparently uncontroversial thesis that responses to one’s racial moral luck are justifiably asymmetrical is therefore put under pressure by the notion of luck, which leads us to consider the symmetry response. Both asymmetry and symmetry defenders can agree that there is bad luck for blacks and whites. It is (one kind of) bad luck to be born white—because it typically puts one on the side of injustice and privilege, develops whitely habits and epistemic and ethical vices, and opens one to criticism for benefiting from an unjust system. It is a different (certainly worse) kind of bad luck to be born black—because it typically puts one in the position of an inferior, radically reduces

one's life choices, and opens one to a variety of humiliating and difficult situations. However, the symmetry response says that while one might rightly condemn the *world* that makes these different positions likely, it would be inappropriate to condemn the *self*, whether white or black. This of course only covers cases in which whites have not intentionally acted in racist or harmful ways, but it can allow that feeling agent-regret for being unintentionally embedded in a system that is harmful to others is not unreasonable. It therefore does not completely reject the applicability of the notion of moral luck to one's racial identity. Rather than agent-regret, then, the symmetry response targets shame in particular, and perhaps guilt, if we disentangle guilt from intentional action in the way suggested above.

How can we reply to the symmetry response? It is correct, but not enough, to point out that whiteness is hard to eradicate and will probably indelibly stain one's character and affect one's actions; and it is correct, but also not enough, to point out that one continues to benefit in non-accidental and predictable ways from the unjust system into which one did not choose to be born. These are true, but they might not satisfy the supporter of symmetry. First, as we granted, it might be said of some whitely habits and privileges that they are pernicious only in a system that considers whiteness the norm. All white people should try not to harm others through these habits and be as attentive to their workings as possible; they should support political and social change, and in that way, systemic change. That is all that can be expected. Second, as noted earlier, we benefit in all sorts of ways from features of ourselves we did not choose and which are distributed unevenly—being talented in areas that have social status and bring economic rewards; being highly motivated and energetic; thriving on the competitiveness and aggression that characterize many influential professions; having sturdy mental and physical health; being temperamentally optimistic. Many have tried to think of ways of leveling that playing field, but it is impossible without massive interference in private lives. Merely benefiting does not yet justify feeling bad about oneself unless one should—and this is crazy—also feel bad about one's rewards in all aspects of the natural lottery of our origins (see Rawls 1973: 101ff; and for a discussion of the liberal response to the lottery, see Kymlicka 1992: chapter 3).

These last claims of the defender of symmetry contain something that is true, and I will return to them, but nonetheless, proponents of asymmetry are unlikely to be persuaded. Could they then reply to the symmetry response by weighing the *bad* moral luck of being white against the *good* moral luck of being white? The “natural lottery” of their origins included inherited privilege, after all. Whites may have the bad luck to be placed in a position of privilege at others' expense, but of course that position is also, and in ways more morally relevant, a matter of good luck for them. Their lives are eased and improved in innumerable ways, which ethically outweigh the epistemic deficiencies that Medina (2013), for instance, explores. They might not have chosen this fortunate position, but surely it means *something*? It seems callous to deny this, but a proponent of symmetry might, in a third response, refuse to accept that their flourishing *qua* white is evidence of an unjust system of white privilege, or that white privilege is unjustly expensive to others. Earlier we noted that a symmetry proponent could say that whiteness is only problematic in an unjust system, so we should pay attention to that system. But a different response is to reject the work that “system” is doing in this debate. In any society, some people will flourish and others will not, and we cannot blame a system if we want to retain notions of agency, integrity, and responsibility. If

whites predominately flourish over blacks, this may be a result of morally relevant features like hard work and diligence which everyone in principle can cultivate. There is a kind of envy at work here, they might say, that is chary of the good fortune of others.

This view appeals to the value of people taking responsibility for their lives and not blaming others for their failures. Again there is something right in this, which I shall explore in the next section. But we can already argue that this very individualistic view misses ethically important aspects of privilege and ethical agency. It does not acknowledge how deeply we are embedded in, and supported by, our social, economic, and racial backgrounds. Being white brings with it a backdrop of security and opportunities that enhances any abilities whites might have, and which is absent for many blacks. It is arrogant and self-serving to insist that whites are successful by dint of their own pure efforts and hard work alone, and it is unjust to those whose lack of worldly success has little to do with abilities, motivation, or assiduity. Such a view reveals a blindness to the patterns of distribution of benefits and burdens; it is not an accident that whites tend to live materially and socially better lives than blacks. Their fortunate position in a system that already favors them helps to maintain patterns of injustice; privilege is passed down generations, and the children of the privileged start off in a better position to acquire social and material goods. The system in which they live ensures that they benefit while others struggle, and, more strongly, a case could be made that this benefit *depends* on there being a group that is less privileged and which can support that privileged lifestyle (for example, by providing cheap domestic labor, and by being less prepared than the privileged for the middle-class job market). An appropriate response to this understanding would be painful. We therefore have reason to evaluate such complacent responses to one's own good fortune and the lack of appropriate moral emotions towards oneself as a beneficiary of injustice as lacking virtue. As we shall see further below, for whites to reject the symmetry response and accept the appropriateness of feeling uncomfortable about themselves can itself be a virtuous response to a vicious socio-political position.

In this section, I have explored the implications of taking moral luck seriously in the discussion about racial identity. At first glance it seems that such luck renders self-directed emotions of blame and guilt from both whites and blacks inappropriate. However, I suggested in return that this symmetry response ignores the nature of systematic white privilege. White people's relative success in the world is ill-gotten, inherited through an unjust system and enabled by the secure structures of their lives. Acknowledging this should occasion *some* discomfort towards the white self who benefits in this way. This is one reason to reject the symmetry response, but there is more to say about the complex nature of selfhood and ethical agency, which shows both what is attractive about that response, and where it goes wrong.

Identity, Group Membership, and Responsibility

Both the critic and defender of negative self-directed emotions can press more deeply on the fundamental notions of identity and responsibility. At issue is how a person appropriately responds to *her own individual self*, for which she is responsible, as a member of a socially relevant group, membership of which is not under her control. While I focus on the moral situation of whites, the issue is just as pressing, in a different way, for blacks, who have for so long had their particularity denied by stereotypes and shallow assumptions.

When considering group oppression and privilege different aspects of ourselves are forced into a destabilizing juxtaposition. I am uniquely I, but I am also a white woman, and more particularly, a white South African who grew up under apartheid and came to adulthood in the early days of the democracy. Am I responsible for the ongoing patterns of meanings of my racial identity, even as I try not to be unjust? Is my group membership a morally relevant feature of myself, to which appropriate emotions are called for? Putting aside individual vices, the line of thought in this context is that it is *as a white woman* that the unique I should feel some kind of discomfort. In a racialized world, in which whites historically have been either oppressor or privileged, it is difficult to think—and would be disingenuous if thought—that one's race is not a morally relevant feature of oneself.

The acceptance of race as morally relevant to one's own individuality and identity will be expressed through the range of moral emotions explored in the previous section. That one does, in fact, feel uncomfortable emotions about *oneself-as-a-member-of-a-group* therefore depends on one's identification of oneself as a member of that group, even as one rejects the standards that govern or partly constitute it. However, what if one refuses that identification, or refuses its moral significance? Someone could say, "Yes, I am white (or black or lesbian or Jewish), but that is of no moral or existential importance to me. I choose to ignore or repudiate its meaning and I refuse to live by the scripts of whiteness (or blackness or homosexuality or Jewishness)" (on "scripts," see Appiah 2005: 110). Can we say to this person that she has gone wrong?

We are brought to the fundamental issues of what it is that constitutes a person in a morally significant way and what a person should accept about herself in order to live virtuously. So, who am I? Only those features I choose or have control over, only my autonomous self? That cuts out most of ourselves as counting as ourselves, if we accept that much of our temperament and dispositions are set down in childhood, and that the natural talents and abilities by which we make a living and define ourselves are not up to us (though their development may be). As Nagel expresses it, taking constitutive luck to its extreme threatens to shrink "the area of genuine agency" to "an extensionless point" (1979: 35). Confronting such an unpalatable conclusion, most of us nonetheless accept those features as part of ourselves and also as appropriately open to ethical evaluation. At the same time, however, we usually do not wish to be utterly defined, or most significantly defined, by any feature of ourselves, even those that play as deep a role in our lives as gender, sexual orientation, or race. For most of us, such features and even our chosen commitments remain but one aspect of ourselves. Persons are complex and unique and it is right that no single feature of them be taken as decisive for identity or for moral evaluation. In this respect there is truth in the symmetry response's reluctance to accept the asymmetry of black and white moral luck.

These thoughts are understandable, important, and, I think, correct. One of the most odious aspects in the history of racism is how complex, unique people were reduced to their race and physiognomy, and how their potential and capacities—and so the narratives their lives could follow—were restricted by the narrow perceptions and power of others. However, some refuse to accept that their group membership is "themselves" in any morally relevant and identity-conferring sense at all. I *belong*, possibly, to many groups, but I *am* not any of the defining features of those groups, unless I choose to make them personally relevant. Many whites seem to have something like this in mind when they refuse to feel guilty about apartheid or slavery or the radically reduced life chances

of blacks in many racialized settings. “Other white people may have done horrendous things,” they may say, “but I haven’t done anything horrendous and I don’t have to identify myself with *those* white people and share their guilt. My whiteness is an arbitrary physical feature of me and, like my hair or eye color or my height, carries no moral significance unless I choose to make it so.”

This response is characteristic of the whiteness that many people still refuse to see in themselves. One of the typical features of whiteness in many parts of the world is that it is invisible to white people, in the sense of setting white standards and ways of being as an unrecognized norm: I am not white, I am just *I*, and my ways of doing things are not parochial, but universal (e.g., Dyer 1997 and the essays in Rasmussen et al. 2001). In a white supremacist world, refusing one’s white identity is a sign of privilege: I do not feel white as opposed to anything else and being white is not significant, just because whiteness is never made an issue. This nonchalance is impossible for most black people. The refusal to acknowledge the moral and political significance of being white is therefore nothing to be proud of or indifferent towards. It is, rather, a sign of something morally and epistemically amiss—a sign of willful ignorance, woeful naïvety, genuine lack of understanding of the workings of race, or callous indifference to other people’s struggles, none of these is a sign of virtue. The logic of whiteness therefore suggests some reasons why we could think that whites who do not identify their whiteness as a morally relevant feature of themselves are morally lacking.

Coming to acknowledge this will require and be an instance of what Claudia Card (1996) calls “taking responsibility for” our character (and, in a more restricted context, see Wolf 2001: 10). As we saw in the previous section, proponents of the symmetry response correctly wish to retain responsibility, and take it as a reason *against* asymmetry. However, a deeper understanding of ethical responsibility in fact supports asymmetry. As noted, we can take responsibility for many aspects of ourselves for which we are not originally responsible. My temper is naturally bad, say, so I try to control it, or my itinerant and insecure childhood made me anxious about change, but I try to prevent this getting in the way of adventure. Similarly, regardless of whether we had initial control over our racial identities and over the kinds of characters we developed as a result—whitely or submissive or bitter or angry—we can still evaluate ourselves and then take steps to make ourselves more into the kinds of people we reflectively endorse. Mature moral agency requires taking responsibility for the aspects of ourselves that, while not under our original control, are constitutive of ourselves. It is what we make of what we are given that matters ethically.

Making ourselves better will take time and effort; habits stemming from our systemic constitutive luck will be difficult to dislodge, and some may work beneath the level of conscious awareness (Sullivan 2006: 4). As Card writes, we “develop responsibility as a virtue by first *taking* responsibility in ways that outrun our apparent present worthiness to do so and then carrying through successfully” (1996: 27). Sometimes, being motivated to do this at all will also be a matter of luck (1996: 27). It is—just—possible that some whites may never enter a world different enough from their own to be spurred on to self-reflection and to reach an understanding of the non-white world. Such seclusion is unusual—the world *will* impinge, however inconveniently—and then we show the worthiness or deficiency of our characters by the way we respond. Responding with shame or guilt towards one’s white self, and deep sadness towards the world that helped to create that self, says *something* positive about one—besides self-knowledge and a

degree of autonomy, those emotions express caring or solidarity, acknowledgement of racial injustice, and a sincere desire to be better than our race makes us. Taking responsibility for one's whiteness will also indicate a willingness to open oneself to unpleasant emotions. One does not decide to feel, nor set out to feel—that would be artificial and, sometimes, perverse—but still, one accepts that one will feel in new and uncomfortable ways as one's understanding of the racial world and one's position in it deepens.

So it will no doubt be difficult for whites to take responsibility for their racial identity and habits, and they may have their sense of being basically decent severely eroded in the process. It is itself an ethical *choice* and ethical step to take up the responsibility that will allow for further ethical change. Margaret Urban Walker writes that being accountable and bearing responsibility for what might have befallen us by luck “means exposure to possibilities of criticism, rebuke, and punishment; to valid demands of reparation, restoration, or compensation; to proper expectations of regret, remorse, self-reproof, and self-correction” (1991: 24). In this field of assessment, she says, we can be expected “to muster certain resources of character to meet the synergy of choice and fortune” (1991: 19). In the process, temptations to “self-deception, self-indulgence, and wishful thinking” will need to be overcome (1991: 20). And if Aristotle is correct, and we acquire the virtues by exercising them (1953: Bk 2), we can in the arduous process of taking responsibility for ourselves, accepting the pain of our emotional self-assessment, and coming to a deeper awareness of the world we share with others, become ourselves a little better.

Conclusion: Self and Others

Luck has played a large role in making us who we are, but as the vast literature on the subject shows, our intuitions are often divided on its moral significance (see the essays in Statman 1993). On the one hand, if luck originally distributed benefits and burdens unfairly but still systematically, some of the burden of responsibility for my character seems removed from me. This is the aspect of the problem which advocates of the symmetry response attend to. On the other hand, to *be* a self at all is to be the confluence of properties, features, histories over which we had no original control. We are constituted originally by luck, but that constitution then becomes who we are. How can we *not* be responsible for the self that arises from them? To repudiate responsibility is to repudiate being a self and all control over our future development.

“Taking responsibility” is a notion that should be amenable to those of an individualistic temperament, some of whom would be attracted to the symmetry response. However, we can take responsibility for ourselves as members of groups as much as for ourselves as individuals who are never fully defined by that membership. Both show an awareness of a racialized reality. The willingness to accept the emotions that naturally accompany this awareness, and to respond with clear vision, self-knowledge and the beginnings of some integrity in a racialized world, is one kind of virtue. It includes the morally necessary step of taking up what Thomas Nagel (1991) calls the “impersonal” stance towards ourselves—seeing ourselves as one of many people, all equally morally important, and I would add, seeing ourselves *as others see us*, and in relation to others. In many contexts, too large a concern with how we appear to others is not virtuous, but when considering our position in a racist and racialized world it is, I think, appropriate. Many whites do not realize how they appear to non-whites, “what white looks like”

to blacks, to use the title of George Yancy's collection (2004). Taking responsibility requires seeing ourselves as others see us and admitting the justice of that vision: it is to admit our implication in a world we may not have chosen, but which we help to maintain. And it can be the start of an apology to those others for our position of privilege over them, chosen or not.*

Note

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