

***Moral Failure: On The Impossible Demands of Morality.* By LISA TESSMAN.**

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According to many philosophers, one of the most important tasks of moral theory is to help us to decide which actions to perform. In *Moral Failure*, Lisa Tessman argues that moral philosophers should focus less on action guidance, and more on accurately representing moral experience. This is particularly the case when it comes to the issue of moral dilemmas, the subject of this book.

Take the overused example found in William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice*. Sophie arrives at a Nazi concentration camp with her two children. She is approached by an SS officer who tells her to choose one child to save from death. If she refuses to choose then they will both be killed. Sophie recognises that she must save both her children but also that she cannot do so. Despite the initial plausibility of this way of understanding Sophie's situation, many moral philosophers are convinced that it is mistaken. The choice is obvious they say, Sophie should choose to save one of her children, preferably the one with the best chance of survival. In Lisa Tessman's illuminating and persuasive book, she argues that this answer fails to do justice to the experience of people placed in such situations. In particular, it fails to do justice to the complexity of Styron's novel which is not focussed on whether Sophie has made the right choice but on how her choice destroys her.

Tessman divides her book into three parts. The first is concerned with examining and defending the existence of impossible moral requirements. In Chapter One Tessman reviews the literature on moral dilemmas with a particular focus on what she calls 'the conflict-resolution approach'. This approach holds that all apparent

moral dilemmas are in fact *resolvable*; that when any moral requirements conflict one will be overridden and cancelled out by the other. Tessman accepts that this is the case for what she calls 'negotiable moral requirements' (those that can be negotiated away in the course of resolving a conflict). However, Tessman argues that some requirements are non-negotiable and remain binding even when they are overridden. In fact it is often not only the *performance* of certain acts that these requirements make unthinkable, even *considering* their performance is prohibited. This helps us understand the horror behind Sophie's choice. Sophie's love for her child requires that she not send her child to her death but also requires her to not even *consider* doing so.

In Chapter Two Tessman draws on recent work in moral psychology to develop a more complete understanding of the experience of unavoidable moral failure. Tessman argues that some requirements are apprehended intuitively rather than rationally. These requirements are best understood as *aliefs* rather than *beliefs*. Aliefs are mental states with associatively linked contents that are representational, affective and behavioural. Unlike beliefs, they are not propositional and motivate automatically rather than in conjunction with a desire. Tessman is particularly interested in cases of belief-discordant aliefs. For example, tourists at the Grand Canyon may believe the glass walkway in front of them is safe yet nevertheless feel terrified while walking on it. Relating this to unavoidable failure, Tessman argues that some experiences of moral requirement are best understood as aliefs (p.82). This explains why they withstand the belief that an action is impossible.

Tessman then investigates whether these experiences of unavoidable moral failure accurately represent the moral situation. Tessman's starts by investigating what method should be used to decide the accuracy of these judgements. Tessman begins by considering John Rawls' method of reflective equilibrium, in which one tests an intuitive moral judgement by reflecting on it in relation to a coherent set of one's other normative judgements. Tessman argues that this method has trouble handling sacralized values as these are values that are inappropriate to question. Tessman proposes a new methodology that appreciates the contingency not only of *what* people value but also of *how* they value.

In Part II Tessman investigates how impossible moral requirements arise in the contexts of atrocity (Chapter Four) and oppression (Chapter 5). Tessman criticizes the majority of those who write about the holocaust for failing to pay sufficient attention to the reports of those who experienced the atrocity. If we pay close attention to these accounts, Tessman argues, we will discover that trying to impose normal moral structures on this period is a hopeless task. Instead we must realize that in occasions like these "morality can fail" (p.172). Tessman identifies a similar failure to pay close enough attention to moral experience in the debate between ideal and nonideal theory. Tessman criticizes ideal theory for being unable to guide action in the real world but argues that nonideal is also problematic fails to appreciate the existence of impossible moral requirements.

In the final part of the book Tessman examines the implications of her view for theories about the demandingness of morality. In Chapter Six Tessman criticizes 'supererogationist' theories that claim that moral requirements only arise from

voluntary agreements. Next, in Chapter Seven, Tessman considers care based theories that seek to moderate the demands of morality in order to protect women from being coerced into taking up caring roles. Both views are criticized for failing to do justice to the phenomenology of the moral experience of those who perform heroic acts or who face demanding caring obligations.

Moral Failure displays an exemplary depth and complexity and Tessman makes a persuasive case to support her central message that moral theory needs to concern itself with accurately representing moral experience rather than simply guiding action.

While I agree with this message I worry that there are other relevant moral experiences that Tessman is at risk of side-lining. For example, in the chapter on supererogation Tessman claims that focussing on the experience of those who perform heroic or saintly acts gives us reason to reject the claim that these acts are beyond the call of duty. However, even if this is true, there are other moral experiences of the same or similar situations that might push the other way. The experience of those who witness the acts of heroes, for example, may give us reason to class these acts as supererogatory, as might the experience of those who fail to act heroically.

This concern, though, should not deter anyone from reading this insightful, illuminating book that provides a fine example of the benefits of engaging in moral theory in a way that pays attention to moral experience. This book is essential reading for anyone working on the issue of moral dilemmas and is recommended to anyone interested in moral philosophy.

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