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Perceptual Failure and a Life of Moral Endeavor[1]

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Abstract

Over the course of her career, Jean Harvey argued that as agents engaged in a "life of moral endeavor," we should understand ourselves and others to be moral works in progress, always possessing the potential to grow beyond and become more than the sum of our past wrongs.

In this paper I follow Harvey and argue that in order to live a life of moral endeavor, it is not enough merely to know about injustice. Instead, we must engage in the difficult and often painful task of overcoming deep-seated cognitive biases that cause us to fail to perceive the ubiquitous injustice that pervades our world. I conclude by arguing that education, empathy, and love can each help us to increase our perceptual awareness of injustice and so should be recognized to be crucial parts of a life of moral endeavor.

[1] I presented this paper at the 31st International Social Philosophy Conference, sponsored by the North American Society for Social Philosophy, where I received invaluable feedback. Parts of this paper will also appear in "Empathy and a Life of Moral Endeavor," *Hypatia*, forthcoming.

Introduction

Over the course of her career, Jean Harvey argued that as agents engaged in a "life of moral endeavor,"[2] we should understand ourselves and others to be moral works in progress, always possessing the potential to grow beyond and become more than the sum of our past wrongs.

In this paper I will follow Harvey and argue that in order to live a life of moral endeavor, it is not enough merely to know about injustice. Instead, we must engage in the difficult and often painful task of overcoming deep-seated cognitive biases that cause us to fail to perceive the ubiquitous injustice that pervades our world. I will conclude by arguing that education, empathy, and love can each help us to increase our perceptual awareness of injustice and so should be recognized to be crucial parts of a life of moral endeavor.

Civilized Oppression and Perceptual Failure

Harvey distinguished "civilized oppression" from more overt forms of oppression by arguing that it is neither formally codified by law nor violent. Instead, civilized oppression is grounded in what Harvey called "distorted relationships". Civilized oppression involves:

> "A systematic and inappropriate control of people by those with more power. The oppressed are treated with disrespect, moral rights are denied or blocked, their lives are deprived of proper fulfillment, and they experience a series of frustrations and humiliations beyond all normal bounds."[3]

One reason why civilized oppression is so pernicious is precisely because it is "civilized". It often goes unnoticed or unrecognized as oppression, and by hiding in plain sight is able to all the more pervasively structure and limit the lives of those it affects.

As a third party to the distorted relationships that characterize civilized oppression, Harvey says that bystanders can bear one of two relations to victims: that of moral solidarity or moral abandonment. Moral solidarity requires taking up an attitude of respect and concern for the other, being with them in their circumstances and meeting them where they are.[4]

Often, standing in solidarity with another requires bystanders to speak out or work to undermine oppression. But, sometimes, in what she calls "totally unfavorable conditions",[5] effective protest is impossible; nothing a bystander could do would change the outcome of the situation or make it better. She says that, even in those circumstances, someone can still stand in moral solidarity with victims of civilized oppression by recognizing that they are victims and seeing clearly that the treatment to which they are subjected is unjust.[6]

The alternative, Harvey says, is moral abandonment, leaving the victim of injustice further isolated, degraded, and diminished within the larger moral community. Falling victim to civilized oppression is one type of harm. Being alone with it – having others witness but not see

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[2] Harvey 1993, 219.
[3] Harvey 1999, 37.
[4] Harvey 20007, 23.
[5] Harvey 1999, 65.
[6] Harvey 1999, 71-73.

it – is another special type of harm. I abandon others (though often unintentionally) when I fail to perceive their treatment as unjust.

Relationships of moral abandonment perpetuate civilized oppression in part because the bystander remains blind to the victimization. The only way to fully stand in moral solidarity with victims, then, is to acquire the perceptual skills to recognize civilized oppression as it occurs in day-to-day life. In what follows I will argue that making yourself into the kind of person who is able to perceive civilized oppression upon encountering it is an important component of a life of moral endeavor.

To be clear, I am not arguing that merely perceiving injustice absolves anyone of the obligation to protest or otherwise work to remedy injustice. Perceiving is often only one of many moral obligations that bystanders bear in the face of civilized oppression, but it is an obligation nonetheless. Moreover, it is the first step to protest and good work; you cannot protest or work to change something you do not perceive.

Unfortunately, however, perceiving civilized oppression is often a difficult obligation to satisfy. In *Civilized Oppression* Harvey says:

> "Acquiring the intellectual insights by no means provides a person with the ability to spot the relevant incidents and patterns. Usually such perceptual skills are acquired slowly, over years. Also, given that various forms of oppression have survived for centuries at the hands of privileged people of good will, it seems that neither an adequate conceptual apparatus nor the relevant perceptual skills just naturally arise in the course of a person's life. They involve effort and commitment."[7]

Consider two cases. In the first, a male student who identifies as a feminist and is opposed to sexism nevertheless fails to notice that his professor does not call on female students as frequently as male students, and does not engage deeply with the questions and comments of female students. In the second, a white woman who identifies as anti-racist fails to notice that she was more quickly able to get a taxi than a person of color standing nearby.

In both cases the actors in question are thoughtful, well-meaning people who are proponents of justice and who (we can stipulate) would assent to the truth of various statistics about contemporary gender and racial injustice, and yet fail to perceive instances of it that are right in front of them.[8] These cases demonstrate the difference between knowing that there is injustice and perceiving injustice when faced with it.

The actors might fail to perceive for various reason. For instance, the male student might be focused intensely on the material and not step back from it to think about how the discussion is going, or the white woman waiting for the taxi might simply be enjoying a night out and be caught up in the conversation she is having with her partner. However, in addition to those types of mundane and innocuous causes for perceptual failure, there is a more pernicious cause that someone who is dedicated to a life of moral endeavor must work to overcome, and it is that everyone has strong psychological incentive to fail to perceive.

Harvey describes the experience of perceiving civilized oppression as uncomfortable, painful, difficult, and unpleasant; it is the kind of experience that can ruin a day, sour an experience, or fracture a relationship. Here she echoes Sandra Bartky who argues that, "Seeing

[7] Harvey 1999, 64.
[8] Harvey 1999, 68.

the social world we inhabit as normal, generally lawful, resting on the consent of the governed, and so forth makes it more difficult (especially if we are its beneficiaries) to see the way in which, even though 'all the laws were in force,' it is also a complex network of systematic injustices."[9] Seeing or perceiving accurately is existentially threatening. Bartky says that, "When one opens oneself fully to the misery of others, we fear being swallowed up in this misery."[10] Much of our own sense of self and personal security is tied to the belief that the world is basically just.

Both Harvey and Bartky argue that it is not merely that people suffer from perceptual failure because other things distract us or because we aren't careful enough, but instead that we have psychological incentive to positively embrace that failure. This claim is supported by recent and ongoing research in the field of social psychology. System justification is a pervasive and deeply entrenched bias towards believing that the status quo is good or preferable. Developed primarily by social psychologist John Jost with various collaborators, System Justification Theory[11] gives an overarching account of how other, previously recognized cognitive biases work together to support system justification bias. This bias manifests itself in different ways depending on your social location. If you are a member of a subordinated group, for instance, you might show outgroup favoritism (thereby justifying your own subordination). If you are a member of a dominant group, on the other hand, you might show ingroup favoritism (thereby justifying your relative privilege). Whatever your social location, system justification bias functions to help grease the wheels for you to see the world as predictable, consistent, meaningful, and just.[12]

Bartky asks: "How is it that so many respectable, even pious persons do manage to 'put up with [oppression] very nicely'?"[13] Part of the answer to her question can be found in system justification theory: the alternative to the thesis that the world is basically just is too horrible to bear and threatens our sense of self and identity. We *need* to put on such blinders. And, simply knowing *about* racism or sexism doesn't stanch that need.

Jost does not claim (nor am I claiming) that everyone suffers from system justification bias in the same way or to the same degree. Some social locations make such perceptual failure more likely than others. In the description of case one above, female students in the classroom are less likely to overlook the professor's failure to engage than are the male students. In case two, other people of color waiting in the taxi queue are likely to notice when a white person is able to more quickly secure a ride than is the white passenger herself. Since perceiving injustice is costly and painful, it is crucial to recognize that the failure to perceive can be a benefit unjustly held by those who occupy a position of relative social privilege. The male student in case one gets to focus on the material without his educational experience being sullied by the realization that his opportunity to speak and be heard in class came at the expense of women who were effectively ignored. The white passenger in case two gets to continue enjoying her night in virtue of not having to notice that her enjoyment came at the expense of another.

The ability to perceive particular types of civilized oppression will come more easily to some than others in virtue of their social location and background experiences. However, that

[9] Bartky 2002a, 136.
[10] Bartky 2002b, 163.
[11] Jost and Hunyady 2002.
[12] Jost and Hunyady 2002, 147.
[13] Bartky 2002a, 142.

someone might be better equipped to perceive some instances of civilized oppression does not ensure that she will be able to perceive all types of civilized oppression. Harvey gives an example of a feminist (who is concerned with gender justice) who might unintentionally fail to perceive and oppose instances of age-based discrimination.[14] Similarly, a committed anti-racist might fail to perceive instances of homophobia. That someone is committed to promoting justice does not ensure that she will perceive injustice upon encountering it. Everyone suffers from system justification bias in different ways in light of their social location. And, everyone has the obligation to work to overcome that bias in order to not just to know about but perceive civilized oppression upon encountering it. What it means for any particular person to satisfy that obligation will vary in light of her social location, background experiences, and perceptual abilities.

A Life of Moral Endeavor

Harvey argues that this work must occur slowly over a lifetime. Inevitably, all of us will fail from time to time. When I fail to overcome it – when I am the one who fails to perceive instances of civilized oppression that happen right in front of me - how much should I blame myself? How much should others blame me?

There are several reasons that count in favor of blaming or reproaching someone, including the consequential benefits of discouraging others in the larger community to follow in the wrongdoer's footsteps, as a method of standing in solidarity with the victim, and showing respect to the wrongdoer (by recognizing her as an agent who can properly be held accountable for her actions). At the same time, Harvey urges us to be cautious when blaming others. She says, "We should beware of setting the moral bar too high. A community is partly a place where we support each other in our imperfection and failings, which is the common lot of humans … We are also all of us fellow strugglers with our own failing and oversights and moral progress."[15] When we treat someone as if their wrongful action wholly represents who she is, we reduce her to her wrong and leave her no room for continued growth. Harvey says that, "It is not true that once a thief always a thief. Without the possibility of fresh choices and moral progress, the commitment to a life of moral endeavor makes little conceptual sense."[16] And, we should all be committed to such a life and to helping others in our moral community pursue such lives as well. Such a commitment must persist despite setbacks and failures that will inevitably follow along the way. That is why, while bearing in mind the positive reasons we have to blame and reproach, Harvey argues that we also ought to be forgiving and understanding of others when they act wrongly. To fail to do so is to short circuit the possibility of moral growth and to resign ourselves to the unjust status quo in exactly the way that system justification bias inclines us to do.

This type of attitude applies not just to others but to ourselves. A life of moral endeavor means recognizing our shortcomings and taking the blame for our failures. The negative self-directed feelings associated with blame and reproach are important for our continued growth. However, we should also be gentle with ourselves even as we hold ourselves responsible when

[14] Harvey 2007, 33.
[15] Harvey 2007, 35.
[16] Harvey 1993, 220.

we fail to stand in solidarity with others, for what we do and fail to do, for what we perceive and fail to perceive.

We must work to reconcile our agency with the social norms that sculpt our perceptual abilities and the cognitive biases that come along with the bodies we inhabit. Much of that is outside of our control – that is how an otherwise well meaning person can suffer from the types of cognitive bias or unconscious sexism or racism I've been exploring. But, that lack of control doesn't run all the way down. If we take seriously her call both for holding each other to account and being patient with each other, the same type of balance needs to be struck. My body works in a particular way; my brain and psychology work in particular ways. Some of those ways are natural and biological; some are socially constructed and born from the cultural norms within which I was raised, educated, and habituated. Those features of my identity might all be a given (in this time and place), but that givenness is not the end of the story; instead, it is just the beginning. I am not simply a cog in a machine; I am an agent who contributes to or works to thwart the machine's functioning.

One way I can strive to disrupt the machine's functioning is by actively working to change how I perceive the world. I can work to change how my body unconsciously responds to those people with whom I interact. With effort, I can change what my eyes pick out and what my ears hear. I can work to become the kind of person who perceives civilized oppression and is thereby more immediately able to stand in moral solidarity with those who suffer from it. I will very often often slip back and fail to perceive the civilized oppression that pervades our world, and such failures are often outside of my immediate, voluntary control in the moment when I suffer from perceptual failure. Despite this, it is important to remember that much remains within my control and there are steps that I can take to make it less likely that I will suffer from such perceptual failure in the future. Doing so is part of what it means to pursue a life of moral endeavor. To conclude, I will briefly explore three steps that such a life involves.

The first is straightforward education through the acquisition of propositional knowledge. For instance, statistics about rates of sexual assault, the distribution of social goods in black and brown neighborhoods, levels of police brutality against people of color, and gendered and raced wage gaps are all pieces of information that someone ought to pursue as they lead a life of moral endeavor. Harvey argues that education is a powerful form of resistance.[17] But, as I have stressed throughout, though education is a necessary component of a life of moral endeavor, it is not a sufficient one. *Knowing that* injustice occurs is not enough.

The second is what Harvey calls empathetic understanding. Empathy (which helps us to achieve an attitude of empathetic understanding) is, "a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation."[18] When we empathize with someone, we imagine what it would feel like to be her (not what it would feel like for us to be in her position, since those might feel very different). However, our imaginations can often lead us astray. Merely imagining what it is like to be someone else is unlikely to secure an accurate picture of another's experience. Instead, our imaginative efforts must be informed by the lived experiences of those with whom we want to empathize. Harvey argues that the way that we can come to genuinely empathize with another is by way of what Elizabeth Spelman calls moral apprenticeship. Apprenticeship involves being open-minded, humble, and willing to follow closely behind in the footsteps of another, which

[17] Harvey 2010, 15.
[18] Coplan 2011, 5.

Spelman says is, "the slow and often painful labor of real perception."[19] Making one's self an apprentice means directly encountering and engaging with others in order to break down our preconceived or imagined notions of what they are like, how civilized oppression shapes their lives, and how they will react to it.[20]

It is important to note that neither apprenticeship nor empathetic understanding require well-articulated, verbal communication. Harvey argues that there are many times when speech is impossible, but that communication can still be secured (in the cases of both human and non-human animals): "Speaking is not the only way in which signals of great distress and indications of the causes can be conveyed."[21] Harvey uses the example of the scientific discovery that elephants are more intelligent and emotionally sensitive than once commonly believed. Harvey says such a discovery was possible:

> "Because a few people have set aside preconceived stereotypes and had the courage to approach the animals in a spirit of humility, to see if there are things to learn. They could not have learned about the grief of elephants if they had not had an attitude of empathy, a willingness to conceive of the animals' having deep feelings, and a willingness to imaginatively enter into those feelings as much as possible."[22]

Apprenticeship leads into and helps us to achieve an attitude of empathetic understanding. It requires active involvement with the other, undertaken with a willingness to humbly try to learn about another's situation and feel another's pains and joys. Adopting such an attitude changes you and enables you to perceive things that you otherwise would not have perceived.[23] It is not something anyone can do in isolation, free from the messy, real-world variance and contingency of the lived experiences of actual people. Empathetic understanding, like a life of moral endeavor, can only be achieved within a larger moral community.

Finally, love can play an important role in helping us to move forward in a life of moral endeavor and can enable us to acquire the perceptual skills necessary for such a life. I am here using 'love' in the way that Robert Nozick uses it in *The Examined Life*, and the way Marilyn Friedman uses it in *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. This account, called the union or federation view, understands love to be about changing the topography of the self – expanding your boundaries to include others to create a new entity, not replacing the existing individuals, but creating a new, additional combined identity.[24] You share in the fate of the one you love; when things go well or badly for the other there is a meaningful sense in which they also go well or badly for you.[25] And, since love changes who you are, it affects what you perceive and how you experience the world.[26]

Both Nozick and Friedman talk about such merger primarily in terms of romantic love, but there is nothing in principle that prevents us from understanding the same expansion of the

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[19] Spelman, 181.
[20] Harvey 2007, 31.
[21] Harvey 2007, 29.
[22] Harvey 2007, 31.
[23] Harvey 2007, 35.
[24] Nozick 1989, 71.
[25] Friedman 2003, 122.
[26] Friedman 2003, 122.

self to include those with whom we have non-romantic relationships. In her article, "You Mixed? Racial Identity Without Biology," Sally Haslanger describes her experience (as a white woman) of adopting and parenting two black children. Over time, her perceptions and experiences of the world changed. She says, "Racism is no longer just something I find offensive and morally objectionable; I experience it as a personal harm. There is an important sense in which a harm to my kids is a harm to me; by being open to the harm, I am more fully aware of the cost of racial injustice for all of us."[27] Since the boundaries of her identity are now broadened to include her children, when they are harmed, she is harmed as well.

By loving her children, Haslanger changed her perceptual abilities and became better able to perceive racist actions, words, and events than she was before. What her case helps to illustrate is that when you love someone, as both Nozick and Friedman argue, you become more attuned to the types of things in the world that they care about, would be invested in, or that could harm or benefit them. When you love someone who occupies a different social location than you do, though it is not guaranteed, you are more likely to become better able to notice the things that would affect someone of that different social location. In other words, if loving someone increases your ability to perceive what affects them, and if civilized oppression would affect them (in virtue of their social location), then loving someone can enable you to better perceive civilized oppression than you otherwise would have. I take it this is part of what Elizabeth Anderson is calling for in her book *The Imperative of Integration* when she says that to eliminate racial injustice we must achieve thoroughgoing racial integration at every level of social life. It is not enough for neighborhoods or workplaces to be racially diverse. Diversity, by itself, is unlikely to produce the kind of perceptual shift that Haslanger describes within her own life. Instead, the thoroughgoing integration that Anderson calls for must involve the transformative power of love to expand the boundaries of the individual. In order to avoid perceptual failure I need to have the kind of serious and personal stake in the welfare of others that love helps to secure.

I am not, of course, suggesting that white people should pat themselves on the back or claim not to be racist because they "have a black friend." Such sanctimoniousness powerfully obscures deeper perceptual failures of those who embrace it and such tokenism is fundamentally at odds with the deep, genuine love I am describing. Furthermore, that you have a friend, lover, or family member who is differently socially located does not guarantee that you will perceive civilized oppression upon encountering it, or that when you do, your perceptions will be complete, undistorted, and free from system justification bias. (Obviously, a great many men, for example, love women but fail to perceive gendered civilized oppression.) Nor am I arguing that anyone should pursue loving relationships with others who are differently socially located merely in order to satisfy the instrumental goal of being able to more accurately perceive civilized oppression. Such merely instrumental treatment is clearly and importantly disrespectful.

My point is that a life of moral endeavor entails perceiving civilized oppression upon encountering it, and living a cloistered, segregated life is likely to produce perceptual failure. If you only love people who occupy similar social locations to your own, it is no surprise that you will fail to perceive civilized oppression upon encountering it. Love can be transformative; though it is not guaranteed, truly loving someone who is differently socially located can help

[27] Haslanger 2005, 282.

motivate the kind of profound shifts of our perceptual abilities that help to make up a life of moral endeavor.

Conclusion

If a life of moral endeavor involves acquiring the perceptual skills necessary to see acts of civilized oppression that we might otherwise overlook (because we are subject to various forms of cognitive bias that strongly incentivize such blindness), and if education, empathy, and love are methods by which we are able to increase our perceptual abilities, then we must all think hard about what we are reading and learning, whether we are adequately humble, sensitive and open-minded when encountering others, who we are friends with, and who we love.

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