

Jean Harvey (author) and Antonio Calcagno (editor)
Civilized Oppression and Moral Relations: Victims, Fallibility, and the Moral Community
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In *Civilized Oppression and Moral Relations: Victims, Fallibility, and the Moral Community*, Jean Harvey proposes an account of the type of moral relations that are necessary to address what she refers to as "civilized oppression." These moral relations are characterized by, among other things, gratefulness, empathy, and moral reflection. Harvey hopes that by creating a moral community composed of people with the right kinds of dispositions we can achieve authentic social justice.

The main problem that Harvey is trying to address in the book is civilized oppression, which is an injustice not caused by the design of social institutions, but rather by "distorted relationships" (3). Such relationships manifest themselves in ways of acting and treating others that unfairly disadvantage one group over another. Moreover, civilized oppression is subtle in that the behaviors that constitute it may not even be obvious to either the oppressor or the oppressed. To elaborate, the author gives the example of powerful men not being comfortable talking informally around women.

It seems at first a purely personal matter, but it can in fact disadvantage members of the excluded group, both practically and motivationally. They do not receive the timely bits of information and quick tips members of the other group receive; they miss the short anecdote about the new manager that makes the person seem more approachable; and they don't hear the occasional, spontaneous word of praise or encouragement. (3)

To the untrained observer, nothing systemically unjust is taking place in the above scenario. Both the agents and the victims of the interactions are probably unaware that the former change their behavior around the latter. Also, many of these men have no intention of disadvantaging the other group, so they are "typically not the enemy in any classic sense . . ." (5).

So what's the solution? According to the author, the solution is to create the right kinds of social relationships characterized by both moral and intellectual virtues. Harvey first considers gratitude as a moral virtue and argues that victims of oppression may appropriately be grateful toward those oppressors who attempt to address oppression, despite the fact that the latter have an obligation to do so. This may seem odd at first, since it is intuitive to believe that gratitude can be fitting only if the help is not morally obligatory (17).

Consider the case of a rich man helping a poor man. Some would say that the poor man should not be grateful toward the rich man, because the latter is supposed to help the former. But as Harvey points out, other grounds determine the appropriateness of gratitude. First, "to say gratitude is appropriate is, among other things, to endorse the basic moral status of the action" (22). So as long as the action is morally good, there is reason to be grateful. And second, gratitude also "requires us to morally endorse some basic aspects of the relationship involved" (25). So if there is a morally good aspect of the relationship, such as mutual respect, then gratitude is appropriate. Both of these conditions can be met when a rich man helps a poor man. Furthermore, Harvey reminds the reader that it is often the case that the privileged have to incur high costs if they attempt to undermine the existing social structure. For instance, "The person's views [may be] no longer warmly received by many of his social peers and deference [may be] no longer given. He [may be] interrupted more, treated dismissively, no longer invited to join in the activities of the group, and no longer kept informed about important matters" (31). For these reasons, Harvey thinks that gratitude for such "break-away heroes" need not be misplaced (33).

The next issue that Harvey discusses is the role of empathetic understanding in moral solidarity. To have empathetic understanding of another, Harvey argues, is not only to have the knowledge of what it is like to be the other person but also to understand his or her emotional configuration. This requires agents of oppression to listen to the oppressed and then try to imagine what it is like to live their lives. Men, for instance, ought to listen to women and imagine what it is like to be afraid of being attacked and raped. That said, Harvey makes it clear that moral deference to the stories told by the oppressed is not necessary to be in moral solidarity with them. If it were, it would have a disturbing implication—namely, that one could be in moral solidarity only with those who can articulate their suffering. This would exclude many victims of oppression, including those who are "seriously mentally challenged, those suffering from certain mental or physical illnesses, like advanced Alzheimer's, young children and more" (48–49).

Harvey argues that though individuals do have an obligation to be grateful and empathetic, it is not one they should try to fulfill alone. Instead, we ought to establish a moral community where agents may raise questions and discuss their concerns with others. This community Harvey envisions is motivated by two moral concerns: "the care and protection of those who are vulnerable to suffering, especially, but not only, non-natural suffering that arises as a result of human wrongdoing, and second, the empowerment, development, and support of thoughtful and intellectually honest moral agency" (71). The goal, as I understand it, is to create an environment that is friendly to moral deliberation.

After proposing her vision for a moral community, Harvey discusses how two types of irreducibly individual contributions—individual actions and mental states—are involved in civilized oppression. By "irreducibly individual," Harvey does not mean moral atomism, which frames oppression in terms of the key players. Rather what she means by that term is that civilized oppression is constituted by the behavior of individual people and not by social institutions. Accordingly, addressing civilized oppression requires that we prevent these individual contributions. One way to do this is for people to protest. In fact, Harvey argues that protesting ought to be both a positive and a negative right. The latter component demands that protesters be allowed to speak or write or demonstrate, and the former component demands that

the "recipient of the protest genuinely [pay] attention and [reflect] on the content of the protest" (115).

In addition to the goal of changing people's behaviors, Harvey hopes that a moral community will also change people's mental states. The idea is that authentic social justice will not be achieved without mutual respect, though outward actions seem respectful. Harvey brings up the case of Sam, a person of color hired for an academic position in a racist department. In terms of actions, everyone treats Sam the way that they should, but not for the right reasons. When Sam comes up for annual review, for example, a letter gives him guidance on how to improve his chances of receiving tenure, but this is only because the others are thinking they have to keep the right paper trail. If Sam does not get tenure, they do not want him to have an "out" just because the usual pointers were not given (135). To be clear, by proposing that people's mental states are relevant to social justice, Harvey is not advocating the regulation of minds. Such a proposal would in any case be infeasible. Rather she is arguing that our attitudes are a legitimate subject of questioning (144).

The book ends with a conception of responsive reflection, which is a *prima facie* duty that both the oppressors and the oppressed have. Perhaps surprisingly, this duty does not only require that victims reflect on the particular wrongs that they have experienced or witnessed but also

involves drawing relevant distinctions, thinking back to other, similar cases and looking for their relevance, thinking about what this or that perception suggests about some action, some institution, vulnerable others, oneself, or those we love, assessing options that hover in the future, thinking back on decisions made, good and bad, wise and short-sighted, our own and those of others, and asking what can be learned from them, asking what we habitually do or do not do that we ought to try to change, thinking about what, morally speaking, are our strong points and what our weakest, calling upon our ingenuity to explore solutions to oppressive situations encountered, and so much more. (162–63)

Harvey believes that responsive reflection is so essential to resisting oppression that it constitutes the difference between passivity and nonpassivity. For instance, in the case of two individuals where one takes actions to resist oppression but only because she is pressured to and the other cannot take actions to resist oppression but reflects on how she has been wronged, Harvey claims it is the latter who resists her oppressive treatment (165).

Ultimately, Harvey presents readers with an appealing conception of the types of relations that are necessary to address civilized oppression. Any person who is interested in battling social inequality ought to be sympathetic to her book. That said, I would like to suggest two areas where the topic can be expanded.

First, it seems to me that what Harvey proposes is extremely demanding. What she wants is for people to be virtuous, which is a goal that everyone can support, but it is unclear how exactly this is supposed to happen. One could even say that it is simply unrealistic to demand that people be morally reflective. Perhaps this is just this reviewer's cynicism, though. In any case, it seems that in order for Harvey's vision to be realized, some support from social institutions is needed. An

example would be changing the public education system in a way that incorporates the concerns relevant to civilized oppression. Also, public awareness campaigns may be useful. Perhaps we should fund billboards and commercials akin to those that were used to discourage smoking. Interestingly enough, then, the next step in the project—a project that is supposed to extend the discussion beyond social institutions—may be to bring it back to the discussion of such institutions and how they can instill virtue.

This topic could also be expanded with regard to its relation to toleration. Specifically, how is Harvey's conception of moral community supposed to deal with those who may not share Western values? Suppose there is a gender-normative cultural minority that believes that those subtle actions and mental states that constitute civilized oppression are just the right kinds of subtle actions and mental states a good society should have. How should a liberal engage in a dialogue with members of this other group? The answer is unclear. Ultimately, if the goal is to create a moral community that not only considers individual actions but also mental states to be a subject of legitimate questioning, the possible conflict between the value of gender equality and the value of toleration will inevitably need to be addressed.