Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy
Volume 2, number 1. January 2006
http://web.mit.edu/sgrp

Comments on Superson

Commentary on Anita Superson's "Privilege, Immorality, and Responsibility for Attending to the "Facts About Humanity."

Louise Antony
Department of Philosophy
Ohio State University
230 North Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210
USA
antony.3@osu.edu

Anita Superson raises a variety of important issues in her provocative essay, and I must neglect most of them. Since my comments will be largely critical, I want to say at the outset that I benefited enormously from Superson's discussion, and I agreed with much that she had to say. What I want to focus on, however, is the overall picture of psychological agency and its relation to oppression that forms the background for Superson's argument. The picture she presumes is a very familiar one, but one which I think is seriously at odds with reality, and one which promotes an ineffective approach to the eradication of social injustice.

© 2006 by Louise Antony

In Superson's view, "both sexism and oppression are failures to attend to the facts about women's humanity." (51) Privileged individuals – men, in the case at hand – fail to see, or else ignore, the equal humanity of other individuals – women – and as a result, act in ways that subordinate the interests of these others to their own. It is, Superson argues, well within the power of privileged individuals to recognize and attend to the humanity of women, and so they are and should be held morally responsible for their failure to do so.

This is a quintessentially Liberal picture: injustice is the result of culpably bad actions on the part of individuals, and bad actions are the result of culpably bad attitudes. I capitalize "Liberal" to indicate that I'm talking here about the grand political theory that grounds both the "liberalism" attributed to the American Democratic party and the "conservatism" attributed to the Republican party. Now there is much about Liberalism that I like. In particular, I applaud its placement of personal autonomy at the center of its underlying moral theory. But I think that Liberalism commits a big mistake insofar as it presumes that the moral centrality of autonomy ought to translate into *political* centrality; insofar, that is, as it thinks that individual agency ought to be the main explanatory factor in conceptualizing social and political phenomena.[1,2] Superson, I charge, exhibits this Liberal

[1] An instance of this error is found among today's "conservatives," who hold that a social guarantee of individual liberty is all that's required to safeguard and foster personal autonomy. Not all Liberal theorists are guilty of this mistake. Rawls, in particular, was well aware that there are social requirements for the preservation of autonomy, generated in equal measure by general features of human nature and by impersonal contingencies in the non-human environment.

tendency: she places, in my view, far too much emphasis on individual intentions, actions, and responsibility in her proffered explanations of social injustice, and in her proposed strategies for dismantling it.

I want to plump for an alternative picture, which I'll call the "materialist " picture. (It's due, of course, to Marx.) Against the Liberal emphasis on individual psychology and action, the materialist posits *social* and *material* bases for oppressive structures. The central concept is the *conflict of interest*. The potential for conflicting material interests is, on this picture, an ineliminable feature of the human condition. Such conflicts can occur even when all the interests involved are fully legitimate, and even if every agent involved is morally blameless. Now it sometimes happens that a group of individuals who share one set of interests manages to gain a stable advantage over a group with conflicting interests. Again, this can occur without any individual malfeasance – it can happen because of something as impersonal as a change in climate. But when it does occur, the initial advantage can be, and often is, parlayed into a system that entrenches, enlarges, and perpetuates the privileges of the now-dominant group. Once this occurs, the moral landscape is changed: the meanings of individual actions are changed, and so is the scope for individually good and individually bad behavior.

To illustrate, let me borrow Marilyn Frye's now canonical example of the benign employer.[3] Mr. X wants to hire a new supervisor for his crew. A woman applies for the job. Although she is in every other respect extremely well-

[2] I should say, too, that I'm a *huge* fan of individualism in other areas, like psychology, which is precisely where it belongs.

[3] Marilyn Frye, "Sexism," in *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983).

qualified for the position, the employer fears – rightly, we may assume – that his crew will not accept the authority of a woman. And so she is not hired. Was Mr. X being sexist? Not the right question. Mr. X's *act* was sexist, but not because he failed to acknowledge the humanity of the female applicant, and not because he ignorantly or lazily acted on a false stereotype about women. Rather, his act was sexist because of a *background* system that had, in a variety of ways, made the applicant's gender genuinely *relevant* to her ability to perform the job.

Now perhaps Mr. X can be faulted for cowardice – maybe he should have risked the efficiency of his operation, and perhaps his own job, for the sake of the meritocratic principle that we may suppose he knew he was sacrificing. Let's take this up later: what I'm highlighting here is the way in which background conditions transform his menu of ethical choices. In a non-sexist society, men would not fear, resent, or distrust a woman in authority simply because of her gender, and would respond to her entirely on the basis of her task-relevant qualifications. Choosing the female applicant would be, in such a world, a thoroughly ordinary, morally unremarkable step. But in a sexist society, the same act may require great personal courage. The dilemma Mr. X faces between fulfilling his institutionally-based duties and honoring his commitment to fairness is itself an artifact of the sexist social structure. Institutionalized sexism, in other words, makes it *harder* to be good.

Now I think it is a kind of theme in Christian ethics, evidenced everywhere from St. Paul to Kant, and embodied in a great deal of Liberal thinking, that actions are not morally valuable unless they were hard to do. The materialist thinks this is ridiculous. If it's hard to be good, it's predictable that people will mostly be bad. So if we want people to be good, what we need to do is to set things up so that it's *easy* to be good. Don't expect your public school teachers to work in

crap conditions for lower pay than the high-school dropout slacker-hacker makes writing code for Nintendo. Rather, *remove* the material conflict between teachers' legitimate interest in leading a dignified life and their desire to nurture young minds – pay them and treat them like the professionals they are. Make it *easy* for them to go into or to stay in teaching, and more people will do it. (This is an especially important lesson for women to understand, given all the caring work we do for little or no material reward – parenting, nursing, teaching – where the guilt trip that we ought to be willing to do it all from love is advertised constantly, part of the social Muzak we hear every day.)

I am not denying that some, maybe even most, sexist behavior involves attitudes and desires that are morally repugnant. But suppose it so: I am still unconvinced that a direct focus on the motives of these individuals in these cases will do much to eliminate sexism. Suppose Mr. X was one of these people – suppose he blithely discounted the applicant's experience, training and references, and spent the entire interview ogling and fantasizing about her, sending her off with a chuckled rejection and a lewd invitation. What difference would it make if he were reformed? The conflict remains, and the outcome is predictable, at least averaged over many Mr. X's.

Superson's psychological, individualistic model actually generates a paradox for political strategy. Individual malfeasance is the root cause of sexism, which leads to the institutionalization of sexist privilege, says Superson. But privilege itself, she argues, causes or at least reinforces the character flaws that give rise to sexist behavior. Since privilege is both cause and effect on Superson's model, it's unclear at what point reforms may enter. If Superson is right, it seems that we must deconstruct privilege in order to change attitudes, even though changed attitudes are a precondition for the deconstruction of privilege.

This charge may seem unfair – can't we work simultaneously to dismantle privilege and to change attitudes? But the objection only underscores my point. The multi-front strategy makes sense only if there is a way of attacking privilege that's independent of changing individual attitudes. But if there are such ways, then they are the ones that ought to be given priority on *either* Superson's Liberal model or on the materialist model. If change is possible at all, the direct pursuit of structural change is clearly the dominant strategy.

One more tactical consideration: even if we decide to focus on changing attitudes, our best plan may still be to de-emphasize the role of individual motives in the maintenance of sexist structures. Challenging perpetrators to undertake personal reform, as Superson seems to suggest we should do, seems an unpromising strategy to me. I have found, in teaching and in political work, that people deeply resent personal accusations, and will defend heavily against any information or argument that they glean will end in one. (I'm like this!) On the other hand, the news that one is the beneficiary of unearned privilege *need* not challenge anyone's sense of personal rectitude. Granted, this information leads quickly to some rather unsettling moral demands, demands that people may then, culpably, choose to ignore. But it locates the enemy outside the individual, and offers the more energizing notion of solidarity in place of the debilitating notion of viciousness.

Moreover, focus on structural factors facilitates the kind of "world-traveling" that Superson applauds. Almost everyone can locate themselves as privileged with respect to *some* oppressive system, and as marginalized, at least to some extent, by some other – such is the world we live in – and by these means, discover grounds of humanization and empathy. (Some of my white male students in North Carolina had a real "ah-ha!" experience vis á vis androcentrism and racial privilege when we talked about

"accent bias" in the United States.) A final consideration: institutional change can be a very effective engine for changing attitudes. Despite the amount of racism that remains in American society, it cannot be denied that there was a sea change in the attitudes of many white Southerners after forced de-segregation brought them into regular contact with black people. And even if attitudes don't change, structural change means dramatic differences for marginalized people: women can now vote and enter Harvard Law, regardless of what the gentlemen think.

One final point to end. I want to question deeply the psychological model that seems to underlie Superson's discussion. My remarks will connect with the question about personal responsibility that I earlier deferred. Superson's psychology is a *characterological* one; that is, she assumes that people possess a set of stable psychological dispositions to behave in certain morally evaluable ways across a wide range of circumstances, and that cause and explain an important range of their behavior. Thus she speaks of men who "are" morally indifferent or morally negligent, and urges those with these character flaws to engage in consciousness raising in order to become more sensitive to the humanity of women. This is a very familiar picture, one that is well woven in to our folk moral psychology. The problem is that it is not a picture that stands up to empirical scrutiny.

Postmodernists have long been suspicious of this kind of picture, and it turns out, I say to my analytic colleagues, they're right to be. Mountains of empirical research show us that a person's courageous behavior in one circumstance is no predictor of how that same individual will behave in a different one.[4] Similarly for "honest," "loyal," "self-

[4] See John Doris's excellent exposition and discussion of this research in his book, *Lack of Character*. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

disciplined"– think about Bill Clinton for a minute. A man with the self-discipline needed to climb the political ladder to its highest height can't resist the allures of a fawning intern? The recent film *Crash* could illustrates well the phenomena this research has uncovered: we see a white, middle-aged cop railing helplessly against an unjust healthcare system that does nothing to help his suffering father, then see him gratuitously harass and nearly assault an upper-middle-class black motorist, and then finally see him reach out with urgent compassion to this same motorist's wife trapped in a car wreck. Is he morally negligent or morally sensitive? It depends, it depends.

That's the conclusion that emerges strongly from the data adduced by so-called "situationists:" our behavior is finely attuned to subtle environmental cues of which we may be totally unaware. "Sensitivity" may evoked or blocked in myriad ways, and the same person may be sensitive to Katrina victims, but not to Iraqi war victims. What the data show conclusively is that we cannot rely on intuition to find out why people behave as they do, nor how to change behavior we don't like. It seems plausible to me that privilege can have some of the effects Superson speculates that it has. But are rich white men less sensitive, in some across-the-board way, than less-privileged individuals? I think this is – seriously – an empirical question.

Where does this leave personal responsibility? I wish I knew. I think the problem of reconciling moral responsibility with the facts about causal determination has only gotten harder. In my own thinking about this, I've come to the conclusion that moral theory must do more than articulate ideals that are impossible for human beings actually to achieve. We are, all of us, "morally indifferent" in almost everything we do – again, the structures we live in make this true even if our inclinations didn't anyway ensure it. But perfect Kantian impartiality – the sort that would ensure that we always

attend to the full humanity of everyone affected by all of our actions – is not only psychologically impossible, but would be destructive of the kinds of particularistic attachments – to particular other people, and to our own particular projects – that make human lives valuable and sustaining. Blanket exhortations to "be better" along some dimension are unhelpful.[5] We need a realistic, naturalistic account of praise and blame that both embodies the beautiful Kantian ideal that every single person is of inherent and incomparable moral value, and yet recognizes the particularistic requirements our particular forms of embodiment impose upon us. We need a far more nuanced account of people's motivations, and a more psychologically realistic ethical ideal if we're to have any hope of moving our societies in the right direction.[6]

---

[5] I can't resist. Remember Lou Grant's premarital advice to Ted Baxter? : "Ted! You know the way you are? Don't be that way." "Ted's Wedding" *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Episode129, Nov. 8, 1975.

[6] In my "Naturalized Epistemology, Morality, and the Real World," I argue that providing an account of licit and illicit partiality ought to be a desideratum on an adequate moral theory, and sketch a Kantian approach to the problem that I find promising. (*The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 26, 2000, Richmond Campbell and Bruce Hunter, eds., pp. 103-137)