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# Feminist Ethics and Everyday Inequalities

SAMANTHA BRENNAN

*How should feminist philosophers regard the inequalities that structure the lives of women? Some of these inequalities are trivial and others are not; together they form a framework of unequal treatment that shapes women's lives. This paper asks what priority we should give inequalities that affect women; it critically analyzes Claudia Card's view that feminists ought to give evils priority. Sometimes ending gender-based inequalities is the best route to eliminating gender-based evil.*

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## PART I

How should feminist philosophers regard the many and various inequalities that structure the everyday lives of North American women?<sup>1</sup> Some of these inequalities are trivial and others are not, but regardless of whether they are individually trivial, together they form a framework of unequal treatment that structures women's lives. Of course, gender is not the only variable that affects equality of treatment and outcome. Race, physical ability, class, and sexual orientation are other factors that play a role; when these factors combine, the situation is even more complicated. Also, inequality is not the only morally relevant aspect of women's oppression, and feminist theorists and activists may need to make difficult decisions about which aspects of women's oppression should shape our efforts. This paper focuses on the inequalities that affect women as women, and asks what priority we should give them.

Let's begin by considering an everyday inequality that is clearly on the less serious side. I have chosen this example specifically because it is trivial. Women, it seems, wait longer in coffee shops for their orders than do men.<sup>2</sup> American economist Caitlin Knowles Myers, along with her students, timed the service in eight coffee shops in Boston (Myers 2007). She concluded that

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men get their coffee *twenty seconds* earlier than do women. And it's not just women who wait longer. The researchers found that black women and men wait longer than white women and men, the young wait longer than the old, and the ugly wait longer than the beautiful. Suppose that this isn't just a local phenomenon and it turns out that women in general wait longer for coffee orders. This would not be shocking or surprising. However, try as I might, I actually can't work up much moral outrage over the extra time I wait for my coffee. I don't much like waiting, and I especially don't like waiting when I haven't yet had a cup of coffee, but those responses are personal and don't generate moral outrage. That's because even if these differences in treatment in the coffee shop are pervasive, they are still part of a pretty luxurious lifestyle. If considerations of equality and justice enter my mind in the morning coffee line at all they are of two rather different sorts. Thanks to the success of the fair-trade movement, I may wonder where the coffee came from and how the people who produced it were treated. Thanks to Peter Singer and legions of other utilitarian moral philosophers who have used one's morning coffee purchase as an example, I may wonder why am I spending so much money on coffee when that money could be better spent on food, water, and basic medical services for the very poor thus saving the lives of people in the developing world. I do not think I have ever wondered or worried about the way I am being treated by the coffee-shop staff, who earn a lot less money than I do and have a lot less job security. Protesting the extra wait time in coffee shops—which, by the way, is not caused by women ordering fancier, more difficult-to-prepare drinks—would be exactly the sort of action that gets feminists branded as “spoiled and whiny.”

The problem is that the coffee-shop line is far from the only inequality that benefits men over women. Indeed, if all the examples of gender inequality were like the coffee-shop example the problem of the treatment of women in our society would hardly be pressing at all; however, there is a cost attached to gender that shows up in examples that range from the relatively trivial to the very serious. On the less serious side, women pay more for haircuts, dry cleaning, and cars. More seriously, we also earn less, are less well represented in our political institutions, do more than our fair share of household work, enjoy less personal security on city streets, and have less leisure time than do our male counterparts. You can pick your own favorite set of examples if you like. Not surprisingly, the ones that move me are the ones from the world of the university. Here is an example that surprised me when I heard it, though perhaps it ought not to have been shocking: studies show that having a female-gendered name on an academic curriculum vitae costs candidates in a process of peer evaluation, both for hiring and for promotion and tenure (Wennerås and Wold 1997; Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke 1999). Further, this is true simply on the basis of the gender of the name. The vitas used in the first study were identical,

so it is not a case of the referees placing less value on the kind of work published by women or making judgments about where women publish.

In the now infamous “Ruth/Robert” vita study, professors of psychology were asked to evaluate applications for a tenure-track position (Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke 1999). Two different vitas were used in the study. One was a vita of a stellar candidate, while the other was just average. For half the professors, the name on the vita was male, for the other half the name was female. Those evaluating the vitas were then asked what they thought about the candidate’s research productivity and teaching experience. Evaluators were also asked whether they would hire this candidate at their university. Gender made no difference in the case of the stellar candidate. However, the study’s designers worried that they may have erred in using a vita that was simply too stellar, too good to be denied (Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke 1999, 524). In the case of the average vita, the male was rated as having higher research productivity. For both teaching experience and research, candidates were rated as having “good productivity” when the name was male, and “less good productivity” when the name was female. In answer to the question as to whether they would hire the candidate, 70% said yes for the male, 45% for the female. Both male and female evaluators were guilty of bias, with women being just as likely to give lower scores to the vita with the female name.

Other studies have found similar results. In a study published in the prestigious science journal *Nature*, the focus was on the role of gender in the evaluation of candidates for post-doctoral fellowships. These evaluations are carried out with the referees knowing the names of the candidates, so in most cases the referees would also know the candidates’ genders. Again, gender made a difference. Female candidates had to have more publications, with higher impact ratings, to achieve the same level of success as male candidates (Wennerås and Wold 1997). The study’s authors were able to calculate the “cost” of attaching a female name to a vita in terms of the evaluation it would receive. On the upside, these studies suggest possible routes for change. Where one suspects that decisions are being made on the basis of gender rather than merit, removing indication of gender may improve the quality of the decisions made. For example, double-anonymous peer review was introduced by the journal *Behavioral Ecology*; after this change, there was a significant increase in female first-authored papers (Budden 2008).<sup>3</sup> This method won’t help in the traditional promotion and tenure-review process because most qualified reviewers will be aware of the identity of the author, and his/her gender, even if not informed of this by the candidate’s institution, but there is enough evidence to suggest it ought to be the standard practice at all journals. Double-anonymous review is not currently practiced in philosophy’s top mainstream journals such as the *Journal of Philosophy* or *Philosophical Review*.

Unfair evaluation by peers in the process of collegial review is just one very small part of a much larger picture, and we're all familiar with the end result. According to a report published by the Barnard Center for Research on Women, "Gender inequities have proven to be stubbornly resistant to change at the level of the professoriate; women continue to be disproportionately employed in part-time and limited-term positions; their rate of advancement through the ranks and their representation at the highest faculty ranks remains below that of men. These differences hold for minority faculty, they are compounded for minority women, and they are amplified at more elite institutions" (Wylie, Jackson, and Fosado 2007).

Further, the university is itself part of a larger world in which women fare worse than men in almost every aspect of life. (One notable exception concerns average life span.)<sup>4</sup> These inequalities persist despite the eradication of most of the formal barriers to women's equality. With only a few exceptions (such as combat duty in the U.S. military), there are very few occupations or fields of study that are not open to women. In Canada, women's equality of opportunity is further backed by enshrinement of equality rights in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. While the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution failed to gather sufficient support, women's equality of opportunity in the workplace has officially had legal protection since the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

However, no one need intend to treat women differently. Note that in both the serious vita-evaluation case and in the trivial coffee-queue case it is most likely that none are aware that they are treating women differently than men. We can easily imagine in the evaluation case that the evaluators themselves would be shocked at the study's results. In both the coffee case and the vita case, the lack of intent to discriminate makes it very difficult to see how to achieve change. Would education about bias be sufficient? Based on my own experiences in the university context, one suspects not. Typically, one hears about subconscious discrimination and bias, can feel certain in one's knowledge that others so discriminate, and at the same time feel certain that one's own judgments are without bias.

So, in the West at least, there are very few remaining formal, institutional inequalities and in many cases, no individual intention to treat women differently than men. Nonetheless, inequalities between men and women persist and affect women on a daily basis. How should feminists regard these everyday inequalities? The problem is that feminism pulls us in two different directions, and while it's hard for me to feel the pull in the coffee case, I have no difficulty at all generating outrage in the evaluation case, despite the fact that feminist academics in the developed world are among the world's most affluent people, leading lives that are rich in material goods and in the freedom to enjoy them.

An aside: university professors love to complain about how badly paid we are but such whining is not supported by the facts. Consider my own case.

According to Statistics Canada, I am a “high-income” Canadian (Statistics Canada 2007). “High-income” means that my university salary puts me in the top five percent of income earners in my country. Not surprisingly, that group is more than three-quarters male. The group of “high-income” Canadians, the five percent of the population who earn more than \$89,000 a year, are the richest citizens in a rich nation. Even tenure-track, beginning academics in Canada do very well. With starting salaries in the \$60,000 or more range, they are in the top quarter of all income earners and well above the low-income cutoff, which is in the mid \$20,000s.<sup>5</sup> There are interesting differences between Canada and the United States but these differences appear, for the most part, at the very top and the very bottom ends of the income scale.

In this context, complaints I might make about men who earn more than I do look more and more like gripes about unequal treatment in the coffee-shop queue. It is illustrative to measure our affluence in terms of “how many planet Earths” we would need for everyone in the world to live like we do. (If everyone lived like people in Vancouver or Toronto, we would need four planet Earths. Like Seattle or Calgary, five planet Earths. We would do better if we all lived like Europeans but we would still need two planet Earths. See [www.myfootprint.org](http://www.myfootprint.org) for a personalized version of this measure.) As well, our lives are, for the most part, lived in conditions of security and peace. We do not live in war zones and our rights to free speech, movement, and political participation are secure. As moral philosophers, or simply as educated citizens, we are aware of the quality of the lives lived by people in poor countries. While thinking about it one way, from a global perspective, it can look as if North American feminists are simply arguing that women need our fair share of first-world wealth, power, and privilege. Similar criticisms of the feminist movement’s focus on discrimination against women in our political, legal, and educational institutions have been made by writers and activists whose own work focusing on class, ability, and race. Yet we also see the injustice in the role gender plays in the evaluation of academic vitas. In the grand scheme of things, being evaluated partly on the basis of one’s gender is not that bad, but it is still unfair and unjust.

How seriously should we take these everyday inequalities? Claudia Card has a straightforward position on the relative importance of inequalities. Her view, simply stated, is that we should not give them priority over evils. She thinks that a feminism shaped too much by a focus on inequality misses out on the most morally pressing aspects of women’s subordination. Card claims that moral philosophers and social activists should give priority to ending evil, rather than to eliminating inequality. In a world that contains a great deal of very real evil, argues Card, we should focus our attention on the elimination of evil over the elimination of unjust inequalities. I share Card’s intuition that the very bad ought to take priority over the merely rotten. This intuition is behind the view known as “negative utilitarianism,” in which the bad (say pain and suffering)

gets weighed more heavily than the good (say pleasure and happiness) in the utilitarian calculus. I've felt this pull when teaching theories of the good and human well-being to yet another class of graduate students when what seems far more pressing is understanding the appeal of the bad and our failure to be moved by the cause of its elimination. "Forget promoting the good," I want to say. "Can't we just settle for more modest aims, like producing a little less bad?"

Card's point is a little different from this though, because in my statement of the problem I've described bad and good on a continuum. On Card's view, bad and evil are of different kinds and can't be distinguished merely by magnitude. Largely I agree with Card that feminists ought to focus on evil's elimination. In the course of the discussion that follows, I also argue that the link between inequality and evil is such that even if we are really concerned most of all about evil, we also ought to care about ending inequality as part of it. I take this to be a "friendly" continuation, or extension, of the view Card develops, but I suspect she might find some of my assumptions to be overly optimistic. Although there are some real differences between the politics and underlying views of liberal versus radical feminists, paying attention to the links between evil and inequality will show that there is considerable common ground between these different versions of feminism as well.

Card writes, "Feminists and other political activists working for social justice or liberation should give priority to addressing evils over the goal of eliminating unjust inequalities" (Card 2002, 96). There are three elements, on Card's account, that make an act evil. She writes that an evil is a harm that is reasonably foreseeable, culpably inflicted, and deprives, or risks depriving, others of the basics that are necessary to make a life possible and tolerable or decent (Card 2002, 16). Insofar as oppression leaves its victims with diminished potentials, severe oppression is a paradigm case of evil. Card's thesis is not just a view about normative ethics. It also concerns the moral force of feminism as a political movement. Card worries that North American feminism, in particular, has focused on securing equal political and economic rights for women (inequalities) and prioritized these problems rather than focusing on domestic violence and traffic in women and girls (evils). To use another of Card's examples, North American feminism has erred in focusing on the gender-based wage inequalities in developed nations over the systemically produced poverty that deprives many children in the developing world of the basics needed to make life tolerable (Card 2002, 109).

In my examination of Card's view, there is rather a lot I want to take as given. It's not that I agree with everything Card says. Instead, my own interest lies in what might be said in defense of some of the projects and goals of liberal feminism. In particular, I am not going to criticize Card's account of evil. On Card's view, evil consists in "reasonably foreseeable intolerable harms produced by culpable wrongdoing." What makes an act evil as opposed to

merely wrong, on Card's view, is not the intentions of the wrongdoer (as many have thought). Rather, an act's counting as evil rests on the severity of the harm inflicted on its victims. "Evils tend to ruin lives, or significant parts of lives," writes Card (Card 2002, 3). Central to Card's account of evil is the notion of atrocity. An atrocity is a paradigmatic act of evil. But there are some difficult questions lurking about precision and priority. Card does not mean that in giving priority to evil we should award it lexical priority, so that we must end all evil before attacking any injustice. Instead, it's more a matter of focus and emphasis. I agree with Card's claim that mainstream North American feminism has tended to focus on inequality. In what follows, I want to look at some connections between inequality and evil, and say a bit more about what exactly it means to focus on inequality.

## PART 2: PROBLEMS WITH PRIORITIZING EVILS

In this section, I examine some worries about Card's claim that we ought to give priority to eliminating evil over ending inequality. Adam Morton raises the first worry, and it has to do with situations in which we might want to make trade-offs between ending widespread inequalities and ending a medium-sized evil. I also consider two ways in which I think Card mischaracterizes egalitarian concern. First, she assumes that we must value equality intrinsically if we are to value it at all. Second, she assumes that egalitarians care only about equality, not about equality as part of a pluralistic conception of the good.

### MORTON'S WORRY ABOUT TRADE-OFFS

One problem that has been raised in response to Card's views concerns *how much* priority the ending of evils ought to get over the elimination of inequalities. In a paper on Card's account of evil, Morton considers the implications of Card's view for trade-offs between medium-sized evils and large-scale injustices. Morton's worry is that we tend to discount the importance of smaller harms that are distributed across large numbers of people. We tend to give greater importance to a small number of really big, bad events than we do to a much larger number of less bad events, even when the total amount of bad is the same and perhaps even when the total is greater in the case of the less bad events. When thinking about Card's work, Morton sees the potential for similar discounting when we compare lesser injustices to medium-sized evils. Card's view says to prioritize evils, but Morton worries that if the lesser injustices apply to enough people, we'll have missed something of moral significance. Writes Morton: "The conflict arises when we assume that gross injustice does compete with the elimination of evils, so that the fighting issue is the competition between lesser injustices and the elimination of, say, medium-sized evils" (Morton 2004, 198).

As examples of medium-sized evils, Morton considers the cases of minor childhood neglect and slight hunger caused by parental carelessness (Morton 2004, 199). Morton constructively offers Card various suggestions for ways to resolve the trade-off problem. But I think Morton's criticisms miss the mark, for they misunderstand two aspects of Card's view. They underestimate the strength of her account of evils, and they also overestimate the strength of Card's account of priority. In a reply to Morton, Card denies that in the case of the "slightly hungry" children or in the case of the cold, neglected dog, any evil has been done. So it's not clear that there are medium-sized evils, on Card's "life-ruining" account of evil, if what we mean by a medium-sized evil is one that causes a medium amount of harm, such that it is bad but not life-ruining. There may be medium-sized harms, but on Card's account, that isn't sufficient for them to count as evil. Real evils can, and do, occur to animals, on Card's view, as in the case of routine pain and suffering inflicted in mass-production slaughterhouses, but mere neglect is not evil. Further, the priority Card's view gives to evils is not the lexical priority view that Morton ascribes to her. Indeed, Card worries that her view is too weak on the question of what it means to give evils priority. "Prioritizing evils is making sure that over time, something significant is done about them, whatever else is done" (Card 2004, 215). But the priority we are to give to evils is hypothetical. Writes Card: "With luck it may be possible to do something significant about both" (Card 2004, 215). I suspect that if Morton were to reply to Card, there would be room for a discussion on just this point. If it is not lexical priority, but instead it is merely a matter of paying more attention to evils than to inequalities, or making evils rather than inequalities our focus, then I think we do need more information about what counts as successfully prioritizing evils and what counts as a failure. One can ask for clear cases of success and failure without thinking that a strict schedule of the trade-offs—between acting to end evils versus acting to end inequality—is attainable. Another way of putting this point is to say that there can be clear cases at either end of the success-failure spectrum even if there is a lot of murky gray in the middle. It need not follow from the existence cases, where we cannot make judgments about trade-offs, that there are no clear cases. I don't think that this aspect of Morton's criticism is unreasonable if Card's theory is meant to guide our actions.

In the final section of this paper, I want to give further support for Card's thought that we might be able to combat evils and inequalities at the same time. This is because there is a connection between inequalities and evil.

#### NEED EQUALITY HAVE INTRINSIC VALUE?

A related difficulty with Card's view that evils ought to get priority concerns her characterization of those who are concerned about equality. Card assumes

that to care about equality, from a moral point of view, is to care about its intrinsic value. On this way of thinking about equality as a moral value, equality matters in and of itself. To say that equality matters intrinsically is to say that it is good morally speaking, apart from the effects it has on human well-being. We may wish to call those who think that equality matters and that it matters intrinsically “egalitarians.” While I think it is good for reasons of clarity to limit the label “egalitarian” to those who think that equality has intrinsic value, it is worth noting that much contemporary usage of the term deviates from this. Many moral philosophers who are concerned about equality are concerned about its instrumental value. There may be some good arguments against the intrinsic value of equality but even if those arguments are successful, it still may make sense to care about equality because of its instrumental value.

Part of the problem with Card’s view here is that she makes use of arguments against egalitarianism put forward by Harry Frankfurt and Joseph Raz (Frankfurt 1987, Raz 1986). Like Card, Frankfurt and Raz are concerned that the focus on equality is mistaken, and that what matters morally speaking is that everyone have enough, that is, sufficiency rather than mere equality. Frankfurt and Raz take on as their target the view that equality itself has intrinsic value and that inequality has intrinsic disvalue. Again, many people whom we think of as egalitarians don’t actually believe that equality’s goodness lies in its intrinsic value. Consider the very simple case of the common utilitarian argument for the redistribution of wealth to a more egalitarian pattern. Utilitarians argue that we are better off overall with a more egalitarian distribution of wealth and goods because we get greater gains in utility by allocating resources at the lower end.<sup>6</sup> For people who are very badly off, a small increase in wealth makes a tremendous difference. Utilitarians focus on equality as an instrumental value.

There are other familiar views that value equality instrumentally. One noteworthy example is John Rawls. If anyone is called an egalitarian, it is Rawls, but his focus is on the level of well-being of the worst-off members of a society, and equality itself is of only secondary importance (Rawls 1971). Larry Temkin refers to views like Rawls’s as “extended humanitarianism” because they focus specifically on the well-being of the worst (Temkin 1993, 8). He writes, “Extended humanitarianism resembles utilitarianism in the following respect. Just as equality will often be endorsed by utilitarianism as a means to promoting its end, so too equality will often be endorsed by extended humanitarianism as a means to promoting its end. However, on neither view is value attached to equality *per se*” (Temkin 1993, 247).

Now, with the distinction between valuing equality intrinsically and valuing it instrumentally in hand, we can ask the question from the point of view of feminist politics. Does it make sense to describe only those feminists who think that equality has intrinsic value as feminist egalitarians? I think it’s more

sensible to think about feminist egalitarianism from the point of view of the policies advocated and the causes one takes on, not the underlying moral reason one has for advocating those policies or taking on those causes. Thus, some feminists might be champions of egalitarian policies because they think that *equality* itself has moral worth and that a more equal world is itself a better world, while others may think that more egalitarian policies are likely to lead to better states of affairs from the perspective of increasing overall *welfare*. Still others might be feminist deontologists who think that equal treatment best expresses the fundamental equal worth of persons. As a feminist moral theorist myself, I'm unsure what I think about the intrinsic value of equality. Many of the intuitions I have about morally better or worse worlds could just as well be explained as arising from a concern about desert, or about the welfare of the less well-off members of our society. I'm not sure where I stand on the intrinsic value of equality although I care about equality very much. The point is that one cannot throw out feminist concern for equality on the basis of arguments against the intrinsic value of equality when many feminists who value equality may do so on other grounds.

#### VALUING EQUALITY AS ONE ASPECT OF THE GOOD

Card also seems to assume that those who care about equality care *only* about equality. A position that combines these two aspects of Card's characterization of egalitarianism—equality is all that matters and it matters intrinsically—is completely implausible; no egalitarians actually hold this view. Call the position that only equality matters “pure egalitarianism.” According to pure egalitarianism, we improve a world in which half of the people are blind and the other half are not by blinding the lot of them. Whether or not they think equality has intrinsic value or only instrumental value, egalitarians do not believe it's the only morally relevant factor. They think that well-being also matters. Thus, the fully blind world might be better from the point of view of equality, but we need not say it is better overall because well-being also has moral significance. Writes Temkin: “Do I *really* think there is some respect in which a world where only some are blind is worse than one where all are? Yes. Does this mean I think it would be better if we blinded everybody? No. Equality is not all that matters” (Temkin 1993, 282). According to Temkin, all reasonable egalitarianisms are pluralist egalitarianisms.

This is not to say that egalitarianism is implausible, only that a certain characterization of egalitarianism is implausible. It is a useful and important exercise to do as Temkin does and ask strictly from the point of view of equality when is one world better than another, but on its own, pure egalitarianism makes for an inadequate theory of moral value. Card puts her worry this way: “Equality as an ethical and political value abstracts from particular levels of welfare. Its con-

cern is the distribution of benefits and burdens among persons or groups, not with the quality or even quantity of what is distributed" (Card 2002, 96). This is only a worry if one subscribes to a monist theory of the good with equality as the sole value.

Aside from well-being there may be other values that egalitarians subscribe to as part of their account of the good. Egalitarians need not think that equality is the only moral value, nor even equality and well-being. Temkin, for example, builds desert into his characterization of egalitarianism. He writes, "Egalitarians generally believe that it is bad for some to be worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own. This is because, typically, if one person is worse off than another through no fault or choice of her own, the situation seems comparatively unfair, and hence, the inequality will be objectionable" (Temkin 2003, 767). This is because deserved inequalities aren't unfair, while undeserved inequalities are unfair, according to Temkin. Feminist egalitarians may want other factors that merit moral concern built into their theory. Any theory that is pluralist in this way will need to say something about how the various factors are to be weighed and balanced against one another, but this is a different worry than the worry Card raises, which is against equality as the sole factor on which a moral theory is built.

### PART 3: LINKS BETWEEN INEQUALITY AND EVIL

Rather than engaging in the project of seeing how best to weigh evils against injustice, I want to see how the two might be connected. In doing so, I also want to find some common ground between liberal and radical versions of feminism. By "liberal feminism" I mean that tendency within feminist thought to focus on women's rights and freedoms. Liberal feminism looks primarily to education as well as legal and institutional reform as the main methods of social change. By "radical feminism" I mean the tendency within feminist thought and political action to focus on women's sexual subordination and to see violence and sexual exploitation as the cornerstones of women's oppression. I think it is less clear what routes to social change are favored by radical feminists; a wide range of tactics have been pursued by radical feminists in campaigns to reduce, and eventually end, women's oppression. Separating our goals—such as increasing the number of female judges or providing adequate funding for battered women's shelters—from the methods we use to advance those goals can help us see space for common ground between liberal and radical feminism.

Card writes that "when feminism is dominated by the rhetoric of inequality, it tends not even to discuss the worse evils" (Card 2002, 98). I agree with Card that feminist political movements make a mistake when they focus too much on improving the lot of affluent, first-world women. I found Card's list of what

feminism's priorities ought to be moving and compelling. She writes that "Feminism, for example, should in general prioritize ending domestic violence, rape (especially forcible 'incest' perpetrated on children), severely hazardous working conditions, and involuntary homelessness over many, perhaps most, inequalities in wages, hiring, promotions, and admissions. Yet we hear relatively little about domestic violence, rape, hazardous working conditions, and homelessness, compared with debates regarding inequalities in wages, hiring, promotions, and admissions" (Card 2002, 105).

What's the source of this mistake? There are some obvious targets in our culture of narcissism with its focus on the self.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of traditional social values such as church and family, many social theorists fear that individualism and consumerism have resulted in a society in which people are more likely to focus on their own accomplishments and well-being than on broader social values or concerns. Given that North American feminists aren't isolated from the values of affluence and acquisition that seem too pervasive in our culture, it would be unreasonable to expect the theories we develop to be uninfluenced by them. Academic theorists of feminism might ourselves be more likely to experience inequalities than real evils. Indeed, some feminists' anger these days seems to be directed more at getting a "fair share" of the goodies than at changing our understanding of the kinds of lives that are good to lead. I am not denying that these factors might be playing a role, but in a way they are external to feminism; they are outside influences on the shape some versions of North American feminism have taken. There are also elements internal to the politics of feminism that result in a focus on the inequalities that are experienced by feminist theorists, rather than on evils that afflict women. One is feminism's insistence on the shared features of women's oppression. We are encouraged to seek common ground across barriers of ability, class, and race. But there are dangers in this way of thinking about feminism. First, it can result in a kind of navel-gazing where we artificially elevate to grander significance things that are important to us locally. Second, we can start to mistake connection for sameness and think that because we share aspects of oppressive experience with other women, we share them equally. For obvious reasons the most common of these points of shared experience concern women's embodied experience; here I mention just two of them.

I was recently on the sidelines of a discussion between academic feminists on the subject of the U.S. presidential election. In a comment on the contenders for the leadership of the Democratic Party, someone supported Hillary Clinton's feminist credentials. She claimed that Clinton's experiences as a woman would make a difference, adding that Clinton shares with all women the risk of rape. But of course there is a real difference between how much personal security Hillary Clinton enjoys compared with the danger of rape faced by poor, working-class women, who of necessity live in dangerous neighborhoods, work

late at night, travel to work on foot or by public transit, and, unlike Clinton, lack personal bodyguards. Yet there is some sense in which both sides are right. There are similarities and differences in the experiences of women, and feminism must be sensitive to both the similarities and the differences.

Likewise, feminists have tried to find common cause in our oppression as mothers. But this too can go badly wrong. Consider Naomi Wolf's book *Misconceptions*, which struck me as an example of self-absorbed feminism (Wolf 2001; see also Brennan 2002). Wolf begins with an awareness of the limits of theorizing about the downside of contemporary motherhood from her large house on a lonely, no-sidewalked boulevard in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Wolf even interviews her baby's nanny about mothering, and she recognizes that her experience of caring for the baby alongside a nanny is radically different from that of women who live in crowded urban or rural environments in which there is a large number of mothers, aunts, sisters, and grandmothers all caring for children together. But her focus on the loneliness and isolation of upper-class mothering misses out on what's bad about mothering from the point of view of women who, for reasons of financial necessity, must work long hours, sometimes at multiple jobs, leaving children unsupervised or badly supervised.

So I think Card is right that there are some lessons for feminists to learn here. Feminism involves seeing the world in a certain way, paying attention to gendered aspects of social interaction and the ways in which these interactions can hurt women. To a certain extent, all women are worse off as a result of oppression. However, we need to realize that the ways that some women experience these wrongs are much worse than others, and that not all of women's experience is of a piece. Some people are hurt much more than others, and their situation is, as a result, more morally pressing. We need to pay more attention to the worst off members of our society. Comparing the inequality in faculty salaries (a mere injustice) to rape (a real evil), we can see where we ought to focus our efforts.

Does this mean that we ought never to pay attention to unjust inequalities? Recall that Card's version of the priority doesn't say that evils need always come first. It's not a lexical priority view. But even assuming something weaker—that our main focus as feminists ought to be combating evil—then what can we or ought we to do about inequalities? I suggest that we often need to focus on eliminating inequalities as a route to ending evils. That is, we can agree with Card's claim that evils matter intrinsically, while inequalities do not, and still think there is a lot of space on the agenda of feminism for fighting inequalities. That's because the best path to ending some evils is through ending inequalities.

Consider the example of disparities in income between men and women. At one level this is merely, on Card's view, an unjust inequality. When we

compare the unjust inequality of income disparity with the real evil of domestic violence, it's clear to me that the latter is more morally pressing than the former. As feminists we ought to care more about domestic violence and less about unequal salaries. Yet unequal salaries and domestic violence are not unrelated. As we carefully point out to our undergraduate students in our introductory women's studies and feminist philosophy classes, violence against women occurs in all social classes. Still, income is not totally irrelevant. What makes a difference is not total household income—as if battering happened in the homes of the poor but not the rich—but rather the difference in income between husband and wife. According to a 1991 study of data from the National Crime Survey, an employed, white, married woman with no children and an average educational background would have her probability of being abused decreased by 34% if her income increased by 20% (Mahony 1995, 17). Spousal income disparity is strongly correlated with domestic violence and other forms of abuse; the reasons are easy to understand. The threat of exit is most plausible when women earn enough independently to provide for themselves. It's not that women ever need to explicitly threaten or bargain; couples are usually aware of how exit-averse their partners are and this information plays a role in the marital conditions one creates. In *Kidding Ourselves: Breadwinning, Babies, and Bargaining Power*, Rhona Mahony applies some of the principles of game theory to family life. She puts the connection between income and domestic violence this way: "A woman who has a higher income can walk out on a violent man more easily. Or she can more credibly threaten that she'll walk out" (Mahony 1995, 18). Children decrease women's bargaining power in a marriage, because women need more income to plausibly threaten they will leave at a time when they are likely earning less. According to Mahony, if we hold everything else constant, adding a child under the age of 12 to a marriage increases the probability that a woman will be battered by 50% (Mahony 1995, 18). Thus, measures that equalize incomes between spouses may be justified, not because income inequality between men and women is itself a bad thing (though it might be that too), but rather because it's a contributing factor to domestic violence. The first reason, then, that equality and evil are linked concerns women's bargaining position within the family.

A second point about the connection between evils and inequalities concerns the expressivist function of unequal treatment. If I am treated differently because of my gender and made worse off as a result, the harm that I have suffered may not be limited to the actual cost of such treatment, or at least not in all cases. Consider the example Card uses, drawn from her own experience as a student. As a woman, she was barred from using the undergraduate men's library at Harvard, while at the same time men were allowed access to the library at Radcliffe. This might not have been so bad except that some of the books required for her courses were available only in the men's library. Female

students were encouraged to ask male classmates or male friends to check out the needed books, but one wonders about the situation of women who were too shy to ask, or who were not friends with any of their male classmates. Card writes: "This affront to my dignity, however, was compensated to no small extent by the privilege of being able to study at Harvard in the first place, in the same classrooms (not true for Radcliffe students of Helen Keller's era) and was not something that agitated me or even occupied my thoughts much, although the difference between the Lamont and the Radcliffe Library policies did symbolize the judgment that female students were less important members of the university community than male students" (Card 2002, 105).

If we think about the damage done merely in terms of the inconvenience, then the damage is relatively minor. But the message delivered by the unequal treatment may be much more harsh. We may think of the policy as saying "Women do not belong here." If that same person is denied access to the university club on the basis of her gender, or not asked to lunch by male colleagues, or not included in meetings, or dismissed in decision-making processes, then over time she can be hurt very badly. We see that small harms can add up. The video *Chilly Climate for Women in Colleges and Universities* calls this the "ton of feathers" effect (1991). Each harm is itself small, but together they can seriously harm women.

The Barnard report, "Women, Work, and the Academy," calls these small harms "micro-inequalities," noting that they are all small and everyday instances of unequal treatment that harm women and minority academics. According to the report's authors, "Gender and race bias exists in the social fabric of everyday interaction; it is articulated in persistent, small-scale, but systematic differences in recognition, evaluation, and response that reflect the expectations central to conventional gender and race schemas . . . . The resulting 'micro-inequities' are cumulative, generating substantial and persistent differences in outcome along gender lines" (Wylie, Jackson, and Fosado 2007).

Card writes that sometimes what happens is that the symbolic meaning of a form of treatment can turn it into an evil, independently of the nature of the treatment (Card 2002, 104). If such exclusions continue over time, "when one's life becomes permeated by such exclusions," they take on an importance they otherwise would not have had" (Card 2002, 104). Thus whether or not a pattern of exclusion becomes an evil, instead of merely unequal treatment, depends partly on the past experiences, family and community support, and emotional resources on which one can draw. Some people are more resilient than others, and a series of acts that may constitute an evil in one case may be only a series of unjust inequalities in another. Consider that students who arrive at university with a history of exclusion and discrimination may be less able to bear the burden of even small inequalities. Women of color, for example, may not come to university with the attitude that they deserve to be there

or that they belong. Consider the following quote from an African American woman studying science, being interviewed about her experiences at university: “I get the feeling I do when I walk through somebody’s house with shoes on. Like I’m in somebody else’s home and I’m improperly walking, when I’m in science” (Anderson, Johnson, and Norlock 2009).

All unjust, unequal treatment sends a message that can be damaging in addition to the harm done directly by the unjust inequality; in some cases this may be sufficient to make it an evil. It may well be that in addition to the inequalities in the university environment there are also genuine evils. Recall that on Card’s definition, what is central is not the intent of the wrongdoer but rather the severity of the harm to the victim. “Evils tend to ruin lives, or significant parts of lives,” writes Card. So in cases in which lives are ruined—and I think here of the worst of the sexual harassment cases—there may be both evil and unjust inequality at work.

Focusing on the content—say a difference in salary—can make it seem as though women are merely concerned about their own financial well-being, or as if achieving the abstract goal of equality mattered in and of itself. Combating these sorts of inequalities can send a message that women are of equal moral worth to men and deserve equal concern and respect. Women’s lack of worth is implicated in acts of evil as well, so combating the message targets evil at the same time as it targets inequality.

I began by saying I was going to take Card’s view about evil as a given and not worry too much about its details. But I’d like to speak up here for the resilient people, and say that I’m not sure that feminist moral theorists ought to be so fast to deem an act as “evil” on the basis of its life-ruining effects. Radical feminists, in particular, should worry about basing their political goals on subjective accounts of the good. Suppose I am not hurt by unequal treatment, not because I’m resilient but instead because I think I deserve it. I believe truly that women merit less than men, simply on the basis of our gender. It’s a mad view but some women hold it. We can likewise imagine women who believe that women who stray from traditional roles deserve sexual harassment. Surely what we want to say is that I *ought* to be offended (even if I’m not), and were I reasonable, I’d mind (even if I don’t). Radical feminists have not had qualms about speaking in revisionist terms about women’s stated preferences, so it seems a bit odd to find this lurking subjectivism in Card’s theory, given her sympathies with radical versions of feminist theory.

Let’s return to the goals of liberal feminism. We might want more women in elected office, more women in higher education, more women in the legal professions, and more women in leadership roles in our society more generally, not just because we think that achieving equality in these occupations is a good thing or we think it’s good for individual women to achieve, but also because we think it’s the best route to other sorts of social change, including the

elimination of evils. On Card's view, we ought to be more concerned with giving people refuge from abusive relationships than we should be with eliminating subtle gender differences in law-school admissions. Again, my claim is that there are serious and important connections between issues of law-school admission and legal reform more generally, and strategies for getting women out of abusive relationships. Therefore, I am not disagreeing with Card about what should get our priority, merely noting that some of the best routes to ending evil may involve attacking inequalities. As well, those of us in positions of power within our institutions may take on the elimination of inequalities because of our participation in perpetuating inequalities if we do not. Thus, when I chair a graduate admissions committee, edit a journal, provide an external promotion and tenure report, or chair a promotion and tenure committee, these provide very concrete opportunities for me to change the way decisions are made.

Card considers the strategy of targeting evils indirectly in her discussion of what it means to prioritize evil. She writes that it may be that improving fairness in wages alleviates poverty and so might reduce the incidence of domestic abuse (Card 2002, 109). However, she thinks we still need to target resources at evils directly, in part because the impact of measures aimed only indirectly at evils is less certain (Card 2002, 109). I am not so sure about this. When I think about a particular instance of the kind of evil that concerns Card—say, for example, domestic abuse—it's not so clear to me what kind of efforts make a difference other than increasing women's choices more generally. This link between inequality and evil also shows that there is much common ground between so-called liberal and radical approaches to feminism. Liberal feminism goes wrong when its advocates say that ending inequalities counts as the only or even the main kind of progress we might want. We also run the risk of forgetting some of the reasons we care about ending inequalities in the first place. Radical feminism goes wrong when it limits routes to ending evils against women to only those that don't target the end of inequalities. We can make mistakes by paying too much attention to equality for its own sake, and we can also make mistakes by thinking that any attention paid to equality is in error.

## NOTES

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1. I am somewhat uneasy about restricting this to North American women because not all North American women lead lives of privilege, and because the situation

elsewhere may be very similar. I'm writing this paper in Australia and much the same analysis may apply here.

2. I first heard of this example on Chris MacDonald's business ethics blog, <http://www.businessethics.ca/blog/2007/11/sexism-in-coffee-shops.html> (accessed August 21, 2008).

3. I use the phrase "double-anonymous" rather than the usual "double-blind" refereeing because philosophers ought to use direct speech, rather than metaphors, where possible. The use of the term "blind" meaning "lacking knowledge" isn't just a lousy metaphor; it's also ableist. A reader, blind in the literal sense, would have as much information as a sighted reader thanks to text readers. Thanks very much to Shelly Tremain for bringing this to my attention.

4. Thanks to Tom Hurka for bringing this to my attention and to John Kekes for writing about this neglected area of egalitarian concern (Kekes 1997).

5. I sometimes speculate about why this is so. I think it's because we tend to look up at those who earn more—say doctors and lawyers—and don't really pay attention to the very many people around us who earn less. It's also related to class. Many of the academics I know are children of doctors and lawyers and earn less than their parents. These same people also grew up with friends who went on to become doctors and lawyers. My own case is very different. As a child of working-class parents, the first person in my family to attend university, I heard my professors complain about how badly paid they were and thought I might not be able to afford to become a professor. I was shocked, though relieved, to discover that they made more than twice as much as my parents. We also tend to think we work very hard so we deserve to earn more, especially after all those years of graduate school. But I look around at how hard many people work, especially those juggling child care and multiple jobs, and think that academics, by and large, have very nice lives.

6. A very useful discussion of the relationship between utilitarianism and equality can be found in chapter two of Kymlicka 2001.

7. The phrase "culture of narcissism" comes from Lasch 1979.

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