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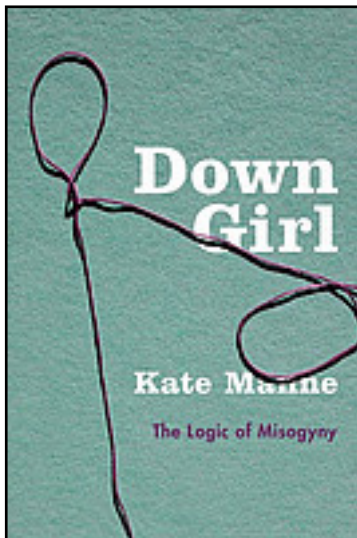
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The Impossibility and Necessity of Resistance Against Misogyny: Filling the Jails

Literature Essay on "Down Girl. The Logic of Misogyny" by Kate Manne



Kate Manne

Down Girl . The Logic of Misogyny

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Kate Manne's "Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny"¹ is a rare piece of contemporary philosophical work that had nearly immediate, and wide-spread, influence on both philosophical and mainstream conversations about gender inequality. Here, I want to engage with Manne's analysis of misogyny by grappling with her pessimistic views about the possibilities for resisting it. After presenting two main reasons for Manne's pessimism, I will argue that, as bleak as her analysis is, there is reason to believe that things are even worse than her description indicates. Yet the particular way in which things are worse is itself philosophically interesting, and can help to illuminate crucial aspects of the fact of resistance, if not specific recommendations for strategies. I will then reflect briefly on why, even given the bleakness of the current political situation in the US and elsewhere, resistance nevertheless persists, before taking up tentatively – and ultimately rejecting – the adoption of a "fill the jails" strategy of resistance.

There are two particular aspects to the possibility of resistance that lead Manne to near-total, and perhaps just total, despair. First is the affectively and intellectually foundational role of patriarchal commitments; that is, they function as the site of thinking, rather than as

objects of thinking, in a way that renders rational attempts to problematize patriarchy ineffectual. Shame is, for Manne, central to this dynamic: for men to fail to receive the admiration and approval of women is to be unspeakably degraded. Given the foundational nature of this particular dynamic of shame, to challenge an individual man, particularly in the company of other men, on his misogynist behavior, simply cannot be perceived as reasonable. It is an act, no matter the tone or word choice used, that inevitably sets off an emotional maelstrom.

“All of this is to say that misogyny makes people so irrational, so inclined to engage in post hoc rationalization, and so lacking in that thing that many tout and purport to think crucial, namely personal responsibility (a tricky philosophical concept, but the point here is one of consistency) that this has made me pretty pessimistic about reasoning with people to get them to take misogyny seriously. And I suspect that, for many readers who have made it this far, you may be of a similar mind to mine and feel similarly frustrated by the apathy, indifference, and pernicious ignorance of most people. So maybe the thing to say, somewhat reluctantly, is – fuck ‘em, in the limited sense of ceasing to even try to catch the moderate with mild honey.”²

So one of Manne’s reasons for being pessimistic about the possibility of resisting misogyny is the way in which it stymies the use of reason and rationality as a tool – and note that even if one views, as I do, reason as one form of persuasion among many, without endowing it with an outsized epistemological value, its loss is a significant one.

Second, Manne’s articulation of misogyny as the law enforcement wing of patriarchy helps us to understand how resistance to it necessarily instigates distinctly misogynist reactions. Much of Manne’s analysis centers on the gendered organization of the giving and receiving of moral goods (such as care, attention, sexuality, prestige, power, and so on), an organization that functions in two distinct dimensions. First, gender dictates whether one’s moral status is defined by giving or taking; second, gender dictates what sorts of social, moral goods one ought to properly receive, give, or take. Thus, there are certain moral goods that are categorized as his to take (power, prestige, money, recognition), while others are categorized as hers to give (affection, sexuality, children, adoration, and so on). Of course, as Manne consistently recognizes, gender is not the only social identity at play here: race and class in particular complicate the relationship between social position and the exchange of moral goods. Nevertheless, the general situation which I am describing here primarily in terms of gender frequently holds true within racial and class groups, and sometimes across them.

It is this double-sided relation to moral goods that constitutes, in Manne's view, a person's gendered social location (a location, again, that is also framed by other forms of structural inequality), and their relative degree of social power. To take up the social position of a man in the context of patriarchy, most acutely if one also is the beneficiary of privilege based on race, sexual orientation, gender presentation, and so on, is to establish oneself as the kind of person who properly aspires to taking certain social goods that are rightfully his, and to receiving certain social goods from women that he is entitled to. Similarly, to take up or to be assigned the social position of a woman in the context of patriarchy is to be established as the kind of person who gives that which she ought to give, particularly but not only to men. Manne's formula can explain, interestingly enough, how a certain form of performative lesbianism can be valued in the context of male-oriented hegemonic heterosexuality: as long as a sexual interaction between two women is clearly intended to provide sexual pleasure to men, it remains resolutely within the bounds of properly gendered gift-giving. On the other hand, queer women who refuse to limit their sexual activity to men are abdicating their gendered responsibility.

It is important to note the difference in the ontological stakes for the two genders. To be a person who properly takes and receives social goods is to inhabit an existential position whose dignity and social worth is established a priori. Yes, that dignity and social worth can be squandered, or one can fail to live up to it, a failure that can be the cause of great shame and degradation. But the moral worth, the dignity and value of one's humanity, is experienced as prior to one's social behavior: it is the engine that drives one's appropriate aspirations, that teaches you that you are the *kind of person* who should go for that brass ring. And when you take what is yours for the taking, there is a rightness about the situation that, interestingly enough, does not diminish your achievement, but assures you and your surrounding communities that it is the right kind of achievement, accruing to the right kind of person.

To be a member of a social group that is defined by giving certain moral goods, particularly to members of a different social group than the one you belong to, is a different matter. Here, at least in the context of a misogynist, patriarchal world, your very human and moral worth is dependent upon your constant, repeated performance of the act of giving. In this context, Manne argues, it is not that women are dehumanized. It is rather that their humanity is dependent on their continuing to give the things they ought to give – they are constructed, in Manne's memorable phrase, as human givers rather than human beings. Should they either cease or fail to give what they ought to give, or should they aspire to take what is not theirs to take, they are not merely out of step with cultural and social norms.

They are demonstrating that they are no longer worthy of the dignity or moral value afforded to human beings. Just as the actions of the male-identified person who successfully takes that which is his for the taking affirm and resonate with the world not only as it is, but as it should be, the actions of the female-identified person who refuses to give and tries to take what is not hers to take undercut the world as we know it and as it should continue to be. She becomes the enemy of all that is right and ordered and true; she becomes a dangerous monster; she is defined out of humanity.

Manne's analysis of misogyny illuminates in agonizingly painful detail how these gendered relations to moral goods result in rage and violence being directed at women who are seen to be giving too little, or to be giving with less than sufficient enthusiasm, or trying to take what is not theirs to take. And as dangerous and unjust as the situation is, there is more: such a setup also undermines the potential for those most oppressed by the social structure to challenge or transform it. That is because when women articulate their right to be human beings rather than human givers – when they lay claim to justice, equality, increased levels of social and political power, and so on – they are, by necessity, expelling themselves from the category of the human as understood by a patriarchal culture. Justice, equality, influence: these are paradigmatic examples of moral goods that are his to take, and in laying claim to them, female-identified community members are acting in a way that will inspire acts of hatred and violence that are as predictable as they are damaging, and range from rhetorical violence to emotional abuse to physical eradication. And, lest we underestimate the costs of such damaging acts of punishment, they are all too frequently accompanied by the threat, often fulfilled, of the loss of social or familial relationships, employment, professional status, etc. Many of us, I suspect, are familiar with the admonition to make our claims for dignity and equality in a more gentle, appealing, perhaps incrementalist way. Manne's analysis confirms our sense that it is the demand itself that is an affront, and that no velvet glove can render it sensible or appropriate.

Manne, with admirable honesty, throws up her hands at this state of affairs and admits that there seems no obvious way to develop effective, sustainable methods of resistance to misogyny. Addressing it head on seems only to provide more opportunity for the law enforcement to be enacted; any sly or indirect approach seems doomed to ineffectiveness. Reflecting on Shel Silverstein's book "The Giving Tree" alongside his poem "Ladies First," Manne writes,

"Yet if the boy may take everything his giving tree/she has to offer, and we think it is lovely, and the girl cannot even eat, drink, and enjoy condiments with impunity, then what am I

doing here? What could possibly change any of this? Even trying is liable to make me seem nasty, abrasive, and pushy (dare I say, shrilly) and give rise to the sort of resistance that, in being aesthetic as well as moral, tends to be fatal. Or, if one does manage to sugar-coat it, it becomes self-defeating. So I give up. I wish I could offer a more hopeful message.”³

I want to complicate Manne’s analysis in at least a couple of ways. First, I want to argue that, as dire as her diagnosis is, the situation may even be a tad worse than she describes, but that the particular way in which it is worse provides a glimpse of possibility. Not hope – I’m going to come down on the side against hope – but possibility.

What is missing from this description is the paradoxical dependence that might be better grasped in a Hegelian, Marxian, or even psychoanalytic framework. It is not just, I would argue, that the male-identified person is not getting something that they want, and something that they are entitled to; it is also that they are being refused something that is existentially necessary to the kind of being that they are, and the refusal not only entails an omission of that thing, but a revelation that they need that thing, and they need it from, even worse, an inferior.

It is not only that men want the moral goods that women are supposed give them – sex, adoration, and so on – it is that they resent the fact that in order to be the kind of beings they believe it is their right to be, beings whose moral worth is established prior to any kind of social act, they need the moral goods that women are supposed to give them. Which means, of course, that not only is their human worth contingent – an unspeakable, unbearable affront in and of itself – but that it is contingent upon the behaviors and affects of inferiors. This dependency can be more efficiently ignored, of course, when the giving is just done, repeatedly, quietly, without fuss, day in and day out, so that it becomes the air that one breathes. In fact, it cannot show up as giving, but must masquerade as being (and yet that masquerade is a fragile one, which is precisely why authenticity is such a matter of misogynist concern, as Manne describes). Similarly, refraining from aspiring to social goods that are framed as his to take must not register as an act of self-restraint; in fact, it must not register as an act at all, but a way of being in the world appropriate to one’s gendered ontology.

But when such giving is refused, it leaves a social void – its absence is much more remarkable, and in a way more present and meaningful, than its presence was. The brutal existential fact is that the male identity cannot be what it must be without such admiration or recognition. And so when female-identified people refuse to give that which is hers to

give, and aspire to take that which is his to take, they are not only risking their own expulsion from the realm of the human and the dignified. They are pulling the rug out from the humanity of the male-identified person as well. When misogynists lash out at non-conforming women, they are attempting to destroy, or at least stifle into silence, the person who is effectively jamming up his own existential machinery. So misogyny is the law enforcement wing of patriarchy, yes, striving desperately to get women back into their gendered lanes; but much of its energy and its desperation is grounded in the fact that hegemonic masculinity has always been parasitic.

Identifying this paradoxical dependence can help make sense of the extreme violence, both rhetorical and physical, that misogynist rage can produce; if your ontology is at stake, there is little reason for any form of restraint. And while this insight seems to be of little use when it comes to developing *strategies* for resistance, it is perhaps more useful when it comes to understanding the *fact* of resistance. Thinking from a Hegelian perspective, the inherent fragility of such structural inequality comes into clearer focus. As Manne points out, any punitive system must also have its ways of rewarding those whose actions properly align with their ostensibly gendered identities, and so there are some benefits that a patriarchal culture affords to female-identified persons. But for the most part, such rewards are either limited to the permission to exist socially at all, which counts as a reward for those who lack dignity and moral worth a priori, or reserved for extreme acts of altruism (as long as the altruism is correctly oriented). These rewards and benefits are profound. But just as Hegel's master ultimately needed more from the slave than the slave needed from the master, an asymmetry that guaranteed a degree of instability in the relationship, so too do hegemonic forms of masculinity need more from hegemonic forms of femininity than the reverse – precisely because hegemonic forms of masculinity are defined ostensibly by the need not to need.

So Manne is quite correct to point out the political and epistemic contradictions that acts of anti-/counter-misogynist resistance will entail, and in doing so to despair of developing strategies that will be predictably and consistently effective. But there is some meaning to be found in the sheer fact of resistance. Sometimes, opposition is its own reward. At least sometimes, we do not resist misogyny because we think that doing so will make it stop, or even lessen its effects. At least sometimes, we do so because, perhaps in an Arendtian way, we need to resist so that we can live with ourselves. We do so because, sometimes, we cannot bear to let one more slight, one more casual, often implicit demand, one more condescending phrase seep into our skin and take up residence. And in refusing to go along, we, for however long the moment can be sustained, and with however many people join us

in that moment, breathe the air of a world wherein the wrongness of misogyny is named as such.

One of the most potent aspects of any system of inequality, and the very reason that we need books like Kate Manne's, is its casual assumption of its own givenness. Acts of resistance to misogyny reveal its own edges and limitations, and maybe even demonstrate that it too is always already parasitic, drawing its energy and existence from the very beings whose worth it denies. When we create social sites, or moments, or mini-worlds, where it is a force and a reality that is opposed, then we by definition create forces and realities that are not subsumed by it. And if there are forces and realities that are not subsumed by misogyny, then it is revealed as that which its belief-oriented wing, sexism, strains to deny: a particular way of organizing and living sociality, but not a necessary one.

Let me turn now to the subtitle of this article and the prospect of a "filling the jails" strategy. Thinking about misogyny as the law enforcement wing of patriarchy caused me to wonder about the moment in the civil rights movement of the 1960s when civil rights activists sought to use the tools of law enforcement, which was clearly working to defend and protect white supremacy, to forward their goals of racial equality. They developed the strategy of filling the jails, an attempt to overwhelm to the point of paralysis the institutions of incarceration until the costs of enforcing unequal laws grew too onerous to sustain.

I am tempted by this analogy – and my temptation worries me. But let us give the temptation a bit of airtime. To adopt a strategy of "fill the jails" would be to encourage widespread, insistent, intentional violation of sexist norms and demands, with the clear understanding and recognition that such violations will incite the violence and rage of misogyny. Such an approach involves an explicit rejection of interventions that assume that merely sharing experiences of gender-based inequality is sufficient to undermine patriarchal norms and patterns. To adopt a fill the jails strategy is to understand that systematic, gender-based inequality is not fundamentally grounded in ignorance, and cannot be dismantled by a mere sharing of knowledge. No: to share the knowledge and experience of inequality will, we understand, not make those who benefit from patriarchy understand something that they now are understandably ignorant of. It will existentially unmoor them, and they will react with rage and fury.

I am tempted by such a strategy because it is a matter of calling a certain kind of bluff: just as in the context of the civil rights movement, it communicates to a systemic form of power that threats are no longer enough, that if they wish to defend this particular way of being in

the world, they are going to have to dedicate more of their own time and energy to do so. It makes maintaining misogyny a more costly affair. It also serves to denaturalize the systemic inequality, revealing it as a fragile infrastructure and making the work that is necessary to keep its bones from crumbling explicit and visible.

In other words: if they are going to oppress us, let us at least make them work for it.

In the end, though, it is clear that the filling the jails strategy is problematic on multiple levels. The first and most obvious reason affirms the queasy feeling that should be inspired any time a strategy from one liberatory movement is seen as easily importable to another, and more specifically anytime that racism is understood as essentially the same kind of inequality as sexism, such that methods used to counter the former can be replicated to counter the latter. Such assumptions commit familiar mistakes that theorists of intersectionality have highlighted. In this case, a main reason that the fill the jails strategy is unlikely to take hold is that white female-identified persons are, as the 2016 presidential election and elections since then have demonstrated, far too likely and willing to prioritize maintaining their racial privilege over undermining gender inequality. We cannot fill the jails of misogyny unless and until white women are willing to renounce and act to dismantle their racial privilege, and there seems precious little evidence that they are willing to do so.

Second, I worry that pushing the metaphor in this way, especially without a detailed, visceral understanding of the kinds of dangers that the strategy represented to those who undertook it in the 1960s, risks portraying the acts of misogyny as less damaging than they actually are. Female-identified, gender-nonconforming and queer bodies who call misogyny's bluff by violating these norms are and will continue to be met with rage, social isolation, the erosion of relationships that are meaningful to them, harassment, and violence. Because in the end, it is not a bluff. The blows to their mental and physical health will be acute and at times devastating; the threats to their employment and financial stability all too real. Of course, such costs were part and parcel of the original strategy, although I fear that dominant and sanitized representations of the US civil rights movement do not sufficiently communicate those costs. Manne's "Down Girl" is a terrible gift that refuses to look away from these horrors, and any understanding of resistance that does not count the cost is itself impoverished. It is possible that an appropriately robust understanding of the costs of filling the jails – one which recognized that the costs would not be identical across all individuals, but would be even higher than some than for others – could be developed, but in any case, it would be a necessary, and hard-won, precondition

to adopting the strategy effectively.

And so perhaps we should not speak of filling the jails in response to misogyny. And yet I know we will continue to resist. We will continue to resist, some of us, some of the time, and sometimes I wonder why. I agree with Kate Norlock in her recent article that we ought not to do so out of hope, which means that we ought not to evaluate our resistance primarily in terms of its effectiveness.⁴ In fact, I worry about the tendency to subject acts of resistance to what Rebecca Todd Peters calls, in her new book on reproductive justice, a justificatory framework.⁵ Peters argues that such a framework – namely, the assumption that terminating a pregnancy requires justification in order to be acceptable – is at work in both anti-choice and pro-choice positions, and that it hampers our ability to recognize abortion as a moral good. Perhaps a similar framework is at work in mainstream political discourse about resistance to structural inequalities, such that any particular act of resistance is subject to a problematic evaluation of whether it is justified, either on the basis of effectiveness or ethical purity.

I am not arguing that we should always set aside questions about effectiveness or even intention when it comes to developing strategies of resistance; our resources, of all sorts, are limited, and we cannot afford to act as if they are not. And certainly we must remember, as Linda Alcoff's recent book points out, that acts of resistance are enmeshed in the dynamics of discursive power, and can all too easily shore up one form of systematic inequality while ostensibly challenging another.⁶ Yet I would hold that we should also maintain the possibility of employing a hermeneutics of generosity when encountering an act of resistance. Such generosity would allow us to inquire whether the person or group who is undertaking it is, at the very least, doing two things: revealing the usually denied or hidden constructedness of the inequality, and so demonstrating that it is not coextensive with all that is or might be; and attempting to act in such a way that they can live with themselves in such a world.

Manne is not wrong about the seeming impossibility of resistance to misogyny. And yet, she wrote "Down Girl", subjecting herself to the awful prospect of remaining immersed in the logic of misogynist acts, and knowing that it would establish her as a magnet for abuse and degradation. Resistance is impossible, unthinkable, doomed to certain or eventual failure. Yet it exists. And before we start asking about whether it is wise, or strategic, or effective, perhaps we should give it its due on that basis alone.

Endnoten

1. Kate Manne, Down Girl. The Logic of Misogyny, New York 2018.
2. Manne, Down Girl, p. 290.
3. Manne, Down Girl, p. 300.
4. Kathryn J. Norlock, Perpetual Struggle, in: Hypatia 34 (2019), 1, p. 6-19.
5. Rebecca Todd Peters, Trust Women. A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice. Boston 2018.
6. Linda Martín Alcoff, Rape and Resistance, Cambridge 2018.

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