

Liberatory Virtue and Women's Hate Group Exit

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When thinking about liberatory contexts, actions, and ideas, hate groups and extremists are probably the last thing that will come to one's mind. In fact, hate groups seem to be directly opposed to any normal conception of liberatory theory, and often are explicitly against liberation for all (for example, white supremacists and Nazis). But the goal of liberation is surely a world without any groups that would uphold unequal systems of oppression and exclusion—so perhaps liberatory theory should have something to say about hate groups. And not simply about *why* hate groups are bad, but about how liberation for those in the grip of hate can possibly be imagined or achieved.

The purpose of this paper is to add to the growing sub-field of Liberatory Virtue Theory (LVT) a general thesis of how liberatory virtues might be conceived for women's hate group exit. As hate groups represent a particularly complicated non-ideal context, I will first address in §1 whether we can conceptually imagine what it would mean for someone in a hate group to have a liberatory virtue and whether we would *want* them to be able to have one. In §2 I will propose that the gender oppression women experience in hate groups may offer a greater possibility for intervention than with white men in hate groups. Finally, in §3 I will briefly explore humility and open-mindedness as liberatory virtues using as a case study Samantha Froelich's exit from far-right white nationalist group Identity Evropa.

1. The Possibility of Liberatory Virtue in Hate Group Exit

One of the primary ideas behind a specifically *liberatory* virtue is the acknowledgement of a non-ideal context where privilege and oppression affect all of our interactions and relations with others. If a culture is well-functioning and doesn't privilege or oppress any particular group of

people, then there would be no need for liberation.¹ Without these non-ideal cultural contexts, there would be nothing we need liberation *from*. A liberatory virtue should then begin in the acknowledgement that we cannot abstract away from the specific contexts agents are in, as their social location and relative privilege and oppression will have a great impact on their character.² If LVT aims at the flourishing of everyone in a given society, a hate group that aims for the exclusion (or in genocidal cases like Nazi Germany, the extermination) of a particular group of people is at direct cross-purposes with the aims of LVT. Their aims are not only not liberatory, they are actively anti-liberatory.

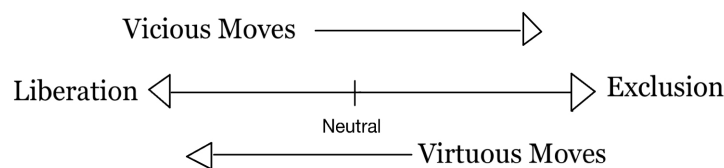
There are a couple ways that a theory of LVT could respond to the case of hate groups. The first response is to declare that because they are explicitly anti-liberatory, they are (and should remain) entirely excluded from LVT. This response would help to keep the focus of LVT on those who have been victimized—the oppressed. It would emphasize that LVT is trying to remedy that oppression, and change the status of the oppressed even within the theory itself. This response would hold that because of their anti-liberatory aims, it would not be *possible* on this view for a hate group member to have a trait that was a liberatory virtue—we would be actively excluding them from the category. They would first have to leave the group—and no longer have anti-liberatory aims—before it would be possible to have a liberatory virtue.

A second response is perhaps to conceive of a spectrum of liberation where hate groups with anti-liberatory aims are on the far right, and true liberation and its incumbent aims on the far

¹ See, for example, Eduardo Mendieta's SEP discussion of the Philosophy of Liberation. "In very general terms, the philosophy of liberation defines itself as a counter-philosophical discourse, whether it be as a critique of colonialism, imperialism, globalization, racism, and sexism, which is articulated from out of the experience of exploitation, destitution, alienation and reification, in the name of the projects of liberation, autonomy and authenticity." From "Philosophy of Liberation," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/liberation/>

² In Virtue Epistemology, the importance of non-ideal contexts has been discussed by authors such as Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Alessandra Tanesini, *The mismeasure of the self: A study in vice epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), and Heather Battaly, "Can humility be a liberatory virtue?" (In *The Routledge handbook of philosophy of humility*, New York: Routledge, 2020).

left. In this conception, we could view any move towards the right as anti-liberatory (or exclusionary), and any move to the left as liberatory. These moves could begin at any point on the spectrum, and could be conceived of in step-wise degrees—more or less virtuous in terms of moving towards liberation, or more or less vicious in terms of moving towards exclusion (See figure below).³ This is the response I favor. Heather Battaly says of the aims of LVT, “we can understand liberatory virtues to be traits that contribute not just to resisting social oppression and achieving liberation, but also *to making flourishing possible for all persons, formerly oppressed and former oppressors alike.*”⁴ If we are committed to this view of liberation, we *have* to address the oppressors—including hate groups—as well as the oppressed. Indeed, on this conception, we *cannot* achieve true liberation without dismantling hate groups. A truly liberated world would be one without any hate groups at all.



2. Why Focus on Women?

Before looking at examples of specific liberatory virtues that could aid in hate group exit, I would briefly like to explain why I propose here to focus on women specifically. For this paper, I will be focusing on white women in U.S. hate groups. The reason for this is two-fold: firstly, white nationalism is one of the largest threats in the United States today, and the specific intersectionality

³ By step-wise I mean to say that no matter how small the action or where on the spectrum an agent starts, we can consider a step that utilizes liberatory motivation to be a liberatory step. Take for example marginalized person A (let's call them May). May is a high school student that exhibits the vice of servility as a result of their status as the only person of color in their small, rural high school. If May were to seek out liberatory online resources and support in an effort to undo her servile vice, we would be inclined to say that May was taking a liberatory step, even if it was very small and May could not yet enact any changes. Then look at privileged person A (let's call them Pam), and see that Pam is an arrogant member of a far-right extremist group who has recently come to realize the error of their ways. Pam similarly seeks out online liberatory resources in an effort to undo their privileged arrogance. If we are inclined to say that May is taking a liberatory step and has liberatory motives, we should then say the same about Pam—the only difference for each case is the point at which they start on a liberatory – exclusive spectrum.

⁴ Battaly, “Humility,” 173. Emphasis mine.

of white women in U.S. hate groups presents a possible specific and targeted response to an active existential threat. Secondly and more broadly, I favor an approach based in the context-sensitivity of intersectional feminist philosophy. This kind of approach suggests that interventions for say, white women in U.S. hate groups may differ from interventions for Iraqi Muslim women in ISIS—and that understanding the specific cultural and social context will tell us whether that is the case.

White nationalism has been on the rise, and constitutes a large part of current U.S. hate ideology. In 2021, the Southern Poverty Law Center tracked 733 hate groups across the U.S., with the largest hate group identities being far-right and/or white nationalist.⁵ Despite a lack of significant or sustained academic attention, white women have been playing their part in these extremist groups all along. And they have not only continued to simply participate in hate groups, they have actively and prominently advocated for them as well. But as an intersectional analysis suggests, white women in far-right and hate groups sit at a different cultural location than white men do. And what this often means is that they have been subject to virulent misogyny because of their gender positioning.

Women in these groups have not only shown an awareness of the existence of this misogyny, they have actively worked against it within their hate groups as well. One example is alt-right media personality Lauren Southern’s well-documented history with the misogyny of the alt-right. Journalist Daniel Lombroso opens an *Atlantic* piece⁶ on Southern with the following incident he witnessed while she appeared on Gavin McInnes’ talk show⁷. Southern is the only woman present, and there is no seat for her: McInnes quips, “Are you ever gonna have kids, give birth, are you going to be a mother? Then I’ll give them my seat. If you’re not making humans, then fucking stand up, bitch.” Southern laughs along in the studio, but on the car ride to the airport with Lombroso, receives a call in which McInnes (who is married with kids, and denies this interaction

⁵ Southern Poverty Law Center Hate Map, <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>

⁶ Daniel Lombroso, “Why the alt-right’s most famous woman disappeared.” *The Atlantic*. October 16, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/10/alt-right-star-racist-propagandist-has-no-regrets/616725/>

⁷ McInnes is the founder of the alt-right organization the Proud Boys in addition to being an alt-right media personality.

entirely), propositions her for sex a second time. “Send help,” she tells Lombroso. “Help.” Southern had an email folder labeled ‘nutjobs’ that she used to file emails from fans propositioning her for sex—highlighting, perhaps, her appeal not only as a conventionally beautiful young woman but also the misogyny of male alt-right fans who saw her not for her ability to promote their cause but instead as a receptacle for their ‘right’ to submissive, conservative women.

Southern was intimately aware of the misogyny and gender bias she faced within her movement, and nevertheless chose to stay and carve out a place for herself. Though clearly Southern did not use the misogyny she faced as an opportunity to recognize bias in general, I want to suggest that when this awareness of the bias they themselves face is then paired with liberatory virtues such as humility or open-mindedness, it can serve as a potential inroad for liberatory ideology. For white men who are privileged in both gender and racial categories, the idea of oppression is a far-off reality. For white women, though those in the hate and far-right groups mentioned here cling to the power their whiteness lends them, they inevitably suffer through indignities and oppression due to their gender. It is possible that this awareness could be leveraged in a way that would allow LVT to take hold and spread that awareness to other types of bias and oppression as well.

3. Which Virtues Could Help?

The goal of the final section of this paper is to look at individual liberatory epistemic virtues and see whether they may aid in hate group exit. To this end, I will briefly sketch the liberatory virtues of humility and open-mindedness, and compare them to a real-life example of hate group exit. The example used is that of Samantha Froelich, which is documented in an episode of the Netflix docu-series *Web of Make Believe*.⁸ In the episode “I’m Not a Nazi,” Froelich details the way

⁸ *Web of Make Believe*. 2022. Season 1, Episode 3, “I’m Not a Nazi.” Produced by Russell Sanzgiri and Clare Tucker. Released June 15, 2022, Netflix.

she joined and became active in the neo-Nazi group Identity Evropa,⁹ and later left the group and ended up testifying against them at the 2017 Charlottesville Unite the Right rally trials.¹⁰

For the liberatory virtue of intellectual humility, I will begin with the Limitations-Owning¹¹ view from traditional virtue epistemology (TVE). Limitations-Owning proposes humility as a neutral trait, which can become a virtue when one is motivated to use the trait by the pursuit of epistemic goods. Roughly, this view sees owning your limitations as involving dispositions to: 1) believe that one has them and to believe that negative outcomes are due to them; 2) to admit or acknowledge them; 3) to care about them and take them seriously; and 4) to feel regret or dismay, but not hostility, about them. In moving this trait to a liberatory context, then either the motivation to use humility is towards liberatory ends, or the outcome of using the trait moves toward liberation and away from exclusion (or both).

For the liberatory virtue of open-mindedness, I will begin with Jason Baehr's TVE view from his book *the Inquiring Mind*: "An open-minded person is characteristically (a) willing and (within limits) able (b) to transcend a default cognitive standpoint (c) in order to take up or take seriously the merits of (d) a distinct cognitive standpoint."¹² In TVE this trait would be motivated by love of epistemic goods: in LVT, it will again either be motivated by liberatory ends, or will help to move the agent or their community away from exclusion.

It is perhaps easy to see how both humility and open-mindedness as LVT virtues would be particularly useful for the privileged as opposed to the oppressed. As Heather Battaly acknowledges in the beginning of "Can Humility be a Liberatory Virtue?" it is arguable that for the oppressed,

⁹ SPLC defines Identity Evropa as part of the "identitarian" movement, who claim that they are not racist but "trying to preserve Western Culture." See more about the group here: Southern Poverty Law Center, "Identity Evropa/American Identity Movement," <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/identity-evropaamerican-identity-movement>

¹⁰ *Sines v. Kessler*, 324 F. Supp. 3d 765 (W.D. Va. 2018). Decided Jul 9, 2018.

¹¹ Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Intellectual humility: Owning our limitations" (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 94 no. 3, 2017).

¹² Jason Baehr, *The inquiring mind: On intellectual virtues and virtue epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152.

humility with those who oppress you could reinforce rather than subvert your oppression.¹³ Though Battaly does go on to argue that there are indeed times that humility can be a liberatory virtue for the oppressed, it is clearly a virtue that the privileged will need quite often in moving towards liberation. For the myriad white nationalist groups in the U.S., liberatory intellectual humility would involve acknowledging their intellectual shortcomings. It could undercut the kind of arrogance that says your own worldview is correct just because it belongs to you (or to your group—such as white nationalists).¹⁴ Liberatory open-mindedness, on the other hand, will help to direct an agent’s attention to the views they have been overlooking. As it would need to either be motivated by or produce liberatory goods to count as an LVT virtue, the (d) distinct cognitive standpoints will be ones that help a privileged agent move away from their own (b) default privileged cognitive standpoint. Together, both liberatory intellectual humility and liberatory open-mindedness stand to be a strong remedy for the privileged: they could undercut privileged group arrogance and make the epistemic testimony of the oppressed more salient and available for uptake.

But the question of whether or how members of hate groups could come to access such liberatory virtues is another matter entirely. To motivate the idea that it is indeed possible at least in the case of women in white nationalist groups, I will briefly return to the case of Samantha Froelich. Froelich was dating a man she calls “Richie” in the Netflix episode,¹⁵ who, when he revealed that he was a fascist,¹⁶ Froelich decided to join him in his ideology instead of leaving. On her own, she found white nationalist group Identity Evropa and applied in December 2016. When she told

¹³ Battaly “Humility,” 170.

¹⁴ This view of epistemic arrogance can be found in Michael Lynch’s “Arrogance, truth, and public discourse,” *Episteme* 15, no. 3: 283-296.

¹⁵ It is unclear whether this may be Elliot Kline—aka Eli Mosley—who would later assume command of Identity Evropa, and Froelich testified to be dating for much of 2017. Chris Schiano, “Former Identity Evropa Organizer Tells Secrets In Trial Deposition,” *Unicorn Riot*, November 4, 2021. <https://unicornriot.ninja/2021/former-identity-evropa-organizer-tells-secrets-in-trial-deposition/>

¹⁶ That is, the day after getting drunk and calling her a race traitor, a whore, and ‘joking’ that he would not defend her on “Day of the Rope.” When Froelich googled the phrase, she learned it “describes the day where the white race finally decides to stand up for itself and it drags Black people, Jewish people, gay people, people with physical disabilities, people intellectually disadvantaged, they’re dragged out of their house and hung by lamp posts.” Quote from Froelich, *Web of Make Believe*.

Richie, he applied as well, glad she was trying ‘to give their children a better future’. Froelich was accepted New Year’s Day 2017, and became Women’s Coordinator (at the time she says there were maybe five or six women, and I.E. had maybe a couple hundred members), interviewing hundreds of I.E. applicants. Froelich was still an active member and coordinator when I.E. began planning the “Unite the Right,” rally. After beginning a sexual relationship with Richard Spencer (a prominent alt-right personality at the time), Froelich was invited to more ‘exclusive’ events, including a party at Spencer’s home where the rally organizers discussed whether it was legal to hit counter-protesters with a car.¹⁷ As this is the way protester Heather Heyer was killed at the August 2017 Charlottesville rally, this would become a valuable piece of evidence when Froelich later testified at the trial.

In the “I am not a Nazi,” episode, Froelich details her disillusionment with I.E. as beginning with personal misogyny faced at the hands of her then boyfriend.¹⁸ Froelich says,

This person was living with me, and showing their true colors to me and how violent they were. And kind of taking the veil off of this. Like, this person showed me what the alt-right really was, which was violence and rape. And, just, I had to start realizing what I was supporting. This is not a movement worth following. This is barely even a movement. This is just a bunch of future criminals plotting their next act of violence.¹⁹

Froelich skips the August 2017 Charlottesville Rally. At work the day of the event, she receives a call from her mom. She says, “and [my mom] called me crying and she was like, ‘This is [your] fault. Like, you have a part of this.’ ... There was. There was blood on my hands. Um... And I never wanted that. And... There’s a woman dead.”²⁰ Froelich details this as when her involvement with I.E. was over. She resigned, and knowing how much information she has about the organization,

¹⁷ Christopher Miller, “A Former Far-Right Extremist Testified About How “Unite The Right” Rally Organizers Planned For A Racial Holy War.” *Buzzfeed News*. November 2, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/christopherm51/unite-the-right-witness-violent-plans-testimony>

¹⁸ Talking about Froelich and her boyfriend in the episode, journalist Andrew Marantz says, “...I need to do whatever he says, because his favorite thing to do is shoot first and ask questions later... he threatens to dox her, to have violent things happen to her. He says, ‘When I’m in charge of the white ethnostate, I’m gonna put you in a breeding camp.’” As the episode uses either pseudonyms or no names at all, it is unclear whether the boyfriend is Eli Mosley or Richard Spencer. At this point the episode simply says, “He is one of the main organizing forces behind this Unite the Right Rally. He’s kind of a big deal in the movement.” *Web of Make Believe*.

¹⁹ Froelich, *Web of Make Believe*.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

says “I just figured I’d rather be dead than a Nazi.” Froelich ends up contacting journalist Andrew Marantz while hiding on a mountain in Virginia. A year after leaving, Froelich joins non-profit Life After Hate, which has a program called “Formers Anonymous,” which she describes as a 12-step program for people who left hate groups.

It is in talking about Former’s Anonymous that Froelich reflects on the change in her attitude. She says,

There are things you see in the movement, and things you go through in the movement, the hateful part of it. And to be around people where I can tell people things... really saved me and really helped me gain perspective in realizing that, like, it is possible to regain life. It is possible to live a life after hate. And I really had to learn to swallow my pride and dismantle my ego. And this story I was telling myself about myself, and about the world, and about the people that I meet. And I had to relearn the good, and I had to relearn the bad.

Here, Froelich is describing a change in attitude that seems not too far off from our LVT virtues of humility and open-mindedness. Froelich “dismantled her ego,” (humility) and had to “relearn the good” (open-mindedness). But as LVT virtues also require liberatory motivation, ends, or effects, we also need to see whether Froelich meets this requirement. As I argued in §1, it is possible that even leaving a hate group is a liberatory move. But Froelich didn’t simply leave I.E.; she testified against them when they were on trial for their actions at Charlottesville—she also now volunteers with Life After Hate. All of these, I would argue, put her on the path of moving from exclusion to liberation, and count as exhibiting LVT virtues in leaving her former hate group.

Froelich also describes her disillusionment with I.E. as beginning in the misogyny she faced from her boyfriend and other I.E. members. Unlike a Lauren Southern who re-entrenched her position after acknowledging the misogyny she faced, Froelich allowed the realization of the violence she faced from I.E. to be paired with her mother’s accusation of her own responsibility for the violence that happened at Charlottesville. This is an example of OM in that Froelich (b) transcends her default cognitive standpoint (c) in order to take up or take seriously the merits of (d) a distinct cognitive standpoint. Froelich also seems to actively own her cognitive limitations in

speaking of Former's Anonymous: she had to 'relearn the good and the bad' about 'herself and the world.' In this way, I think Froelich stands as an example of a far-right woman who, through the recognition of her own marginalization, used the liberatory virtues of humility and open-mindedness to reverse course and exit her hate group.

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