Is Masculinity a Vice?

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The philosophical literature on masculinity—to the extent that there is one—is minuscule. This fact is striking for many reasons, not least of which being that philosophy has traditionally been, and to a lesser but still significant extent remains, a male-dominated field of study. This is not to say that philosophers and theorists in related fields have not written at all about masculinity and its discontents. Feminist philosophers, virtually alone in subjecting this topic to philosophical reflection, have penned a variety of probing, rigorous and immensely important works on the subject. But, for very good reasons, the main focus of these works has been to construct what we might call an “external” or “outward facing” critique of contemporary forms of masculinity—that is to say, the emphasis has been on the ways in which masculinity encourages, and even rewards, behaviors that are damaging to persons other than those who are masculine. That this has been the focus of most research on the topic, particularly feminist research, is just as it should be. But there remains a distinct and normatively significant question about masculinity that does not bear on “outward facing” questions at all: is masculinity good for the person who exhibits masculine character traits and dispositions? Or, put in the language of eudaimonistic conceptions of virtue: does masculine character promote or obstruct flourishing for the person who exhibits these character traits—simply put: is masculinity a virtue or a vice, or some complicated combination of both? In this paper, I’ll argue that key features of masculinity are best understood as vices in the sense that they are obstacles to flourishing for those who exhibit them.