

Philosophical Conversations

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***Philosophical Conversations* is designed to stimulate thought and discussion, and keep you philosophically active. The format will be the presentation of a brief position paper to which responses are encouraged. In the subsequent issues selected responses may be published in addition to a new position paper. We invite you to respond to this position paper, either by contacting the author or the Department. (Addresses, mail and e-mail, and phone numbers and fax numbers are provided at the end of this issue).**

Rethinking Responsibility

Alison Bailey*

On 29 March, 1996 Bridget Ward trudged her family's belongings into the house she had just rented in the 2700 block of Eddington Street. The 32 year-old African American single-mother's move to Bridesburg was a step up for her and her daughters who had been living in West Philadelphia. Ward wanted a safer haven to raise her children and was delighted when she found Section Eight housing in the area. Bridesburgers describe their community as "one of Philadelphia's best kept secrets" and are suspicious of newcomers. In 1980 the U.S. census recorded one African American living in the historically working class white neighborhood. On the night of her move, Ward heard people marching in the street yelling, "Burn motherfucker, burn!" She awoke to find "Nigger Leave Now" scrawled on her house and sidewalk. That afternoon Ward's extended family came out to help her scrub the house and sidewalk. Only one local family joined them. A few supported the Wards, but most feared that Bridesburg would soon become like other suburbs that "went down the toilet" when people of color moved in. Two weeks later, Ward received an anonymous letter saying "We firebombed the lady on Thompson Street, and we will firebomb your house too." In the end, the police protection, support from City Hall and some neighbors wasn't enough. Two weeks after receiving the letter, Ward came down her steps and threw her hands up before a sea of Media and said, "Yes, I'm going to move. Y'all got your neighborhood. You can have it."

The increasing visibility of hate crimes in the U.S. raises important questions about how we ought to (re?)conceive of our moral responsibility for violence occurring in our communities. Traditionally, questions of responsibility have been framed along individualist lines. The details among these liberal views differ, but most are variations on the following: to say that "Person P is morally responsible for Result R" means simply that this person in some way contributed to, caused, or intended the result, perhaps with the qualification that these action(s) were done voluntarily, that less harmful alternatives were available and rejected, or that there was some awareness that the individual was contributing to this particular result and not another one.

Since the Second World War a substantial literature on collective responsibility has arisen which explores the possibility that *groups* might be accountable for the harms perpetuated by their members. However, most of this literature simply extends individualist intuitions about responsibility to cover nations, ethnic groups, corporations, associations, and random collectives. But are these revised accounts really helpful in explaining community responsibility for hate crimes? Some scholars don't think so. Recently, some feminists, communitarians, existentialists, and virtue theorists have argued that liberal approaches, and their collective descendants, frame responsibility too narrowly. In what follows I explain why I think liberal accounts of responsibility become problematic when applied to cases like Bridesburg. I conclude with a brief sketch of ways we might begin to rethink responsibility from the perspective of the injured.

Few challenge the idea that individual moral agents are the primary bearers of responsibility. The parties guilty of terrorizing Ward should be held accountable for their actions; this much is clear. The strength of individualist-based approaches lies in their ability to redress harms simply and quickly. When applied to cases like Bridesburg, however, these approaches frame moral inquiry in ways that maintain the invisibility of institutionalized prejudices. Reducing the crimes against the Ward family to the level of a child's tale of good neighbors rewarded for their kindness and bad neighbors paying for their hatefulness with a lesson about the virtues of tolerance treats hate crimes as if they were no different than non-racially motivated crimes. Burglary, car jacking, and armed robbery, for instance, are normally understood as isolated incidents. Victims are picked because they are easy targets; race and gender are often incidental to these crimes. Find the perpetrator, solve the crime, and that series of crimes usually stops. Rape, gay bashing, and racially-motivated hate crimes, however, presuppose the conscious choice of female, gay/lesbian, or racial/ethnic minority targets. The identity of the victim is not incidental to the crime. Thus, finding the perpetrator is no guarantee that the next black family moving to Bridesburg will not also be terrorized.

On the surface traditional approaches recognize that hate crimes deserve urgent attention in a way that random burglaries do not. What I find curious is that these approaches fail to explore what most feminists see as obvious differences between burglaries and gay-bashings. They overlook the important political and cultural fact that hate-crimes have racist and hetero/sexist *systemic* backing. To fully address harms resulting from hate crimes our notion of responsibility must look beyond the moral moment of the crime itself. If we understand racism or (hetero) sexism as a complex systems of domination that are politically created and culturally nourished--and not just as the results of a few peoples' prejudiced attitudes--then, it makes sense to frame responsibility for hate crimes in ways that not only hold individual perpetrators responsible, but also take into account the systemic dimensions of injustice and the role communities play in keeping these systems in place (e.g. the attitude that Bridesburg is one of Philadelphia's best kept secrets). The main complaint against liberal approaches then, is that they fail to capture the systemic dimensions of harms associated with (hetero) sexism, racism, or anti-Semitism because they focus too narrowly on isolated intentions, actions, and outcomes, and ignore the ways in which complex systems of domination institutionalize practices that increase the likelihood of hate crimes.

In addition, I think that the habit of foregrounding actions and not engaging the role of institutionalized practices reveals an interesting wrinkle in individualist-based conceptions of responsibility. It has been suggested that moral perspectives that look

“downward and back” are epistemically the products of race and gender privilege. (Card, 1996; Scheman, 1993) That is, the moral point of view that looks down and back is the cultural product of those who move through the world unaware of barriers placed in front of those without race, class or gender privilege. This privileged moral standpoint foregrounds punishment and reward and the pressing desire to bring guilty parties to justice. It is an asymmetrical understanding or harm concerned primarily with assigning responsibility for past wrongful actions rather than with preventing future ones. As Claudia Card explains:

The backward-looking orientation embodies a perspective of observation—what Williams calls the “view from there” as opposed to the “view from here.” The “view from there” is characteristic of the administrator, and to some extent, of the teacher or therapist. It is basically a third-person perspective, although we can learn to take this perspective on ourselves. (Card: 1996, 25-6)

Minnie Bruce Pratt's autobiographical account of how she became aware of the privileges associated with being a white Southern lady make the connection between the third-person perspective and race privilege clear:

I was taught to be the *judge*, of moral responsibility and of punishment only in relation to *my* ethical system; was taught to be the *martyr*, to take all the responsibility for change, *and* the glory, to expect others to do nothing; was taught to be a *peacemaker*, to meditate, negotiate between opposing sides because *I* knew the right way; was taught to be a *preacher*, to point out wrongs and tell others what to do. (1984:14-15)

Card and Pratt's observations illustrate the ways in which traditional approaches to responsibility have positioned deliberating agents--the administrator, the judge, the scientist; practitioners of *noblesse oblige*-- as disembodied spectators. I don't mean to dismiss these perspectives altogether. In some cases third-person perspectives may be useful. My worry is that this standpoint comes with what have been called epistemic “blind-spots.” Those with race privilege often find it difficult to understand why people of color can't just work harder to get ahead like their parents did; and, gender privilege makes it difficult for most men to understand and to take seriously women's constant charges of discrimination and harassment on the job. If liberal views of responsibility are constructed from the standpoint of privilege (the view from there), in ways that exclude the standpoint of those harmed by oppression (the view from here), it follows that they will not only fail to capture the structural dimensions of hate crimes but also the voices of those harmed. Moral inquiry is framed in ways that foreground actions and intentions of harm-causers while distancing the voices of those harmed. How might this be remedied?

At this point, I can offer a few suggestions as to the kinds of issues one should be attentive to when considering how to address responsibility for community violence. Feminist ethic's recent interest in questions of responsibility should extend beyond a simple intellectual curiosity that is satisfiable by achieving correct moral judgments about which party or parties are responsible for a harmful state of affairs. Instead it should seek out something Margaret Walker has described as “shareable interpretations and bearable resolutions to our moral binds.” (1989, 41) To an extent this means giving up seeing ourselves as responsible beings-- in the sense that being responsible means focusing exclusively on short-term fixes *for* those harmed-- Instead all community members need to dialogue *with* those harmed to prevent future harms. In this sense responsible action becomes more a matter of “acting with” than “acting for.”

We also need a more open-ended account of responsible action. Since framing discussions of community responsibility exclusively around distribution of blame encourages us to see responsibility along strictly causal, usually backward-looking lines, we might encourage more forward-looking thinking if we began to understand responsible action in terms of how a community should *respond* to harms regardless of each member's contributions. The worry that responsibility continues to be crafted as a down- and backward-looking ethics of control is one reason why feminism have begun to speak in terms of an “ethics of risk” (Welch, 1990) and have traded a language of responsibility for one of responsiveness. (Hoagland, 1987; Welch, 1990) What is needed here is something like a shared *respond-ability*: a way of thinking about accountability that reframes our approach to harms along forward-looking lines that are not strictly causal. A Shared respond-ability might emphasize that community members ought to take a practical interest in determining not only how they ought to respond to the “guilty parties”, but also how they should support those wronged. It also leaves room to address how the community as a whole might strategize ways of preventing future harms.

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The following is partial response by Barry Brown to the previous *Philosophical Conversations*, “The Mind-Body Problem” by Harry Deutsch. It will be followed by Dr. Deutsch's response. (Brown's response in its entirety can be found at <http://www.philosophy.ilstu.edu/barrybrown00.html>)

Response from Barry Brown (1980):**

This is the second response I have written to *Philosophical Conversations*. Again I express my appreciation to the ISU Philosophy Department and now to you, for your essay prompted me to do quite a bit of reading, thinking, and writing that I would otherwise not have done. I enjoyed it tremendously. This letter is likely too late for publication, but I hope parts of this may be of help to you in your teaching.

I began thinking about the problem you presented with the hope that considering the fine distinctions among objective physical facts, indexical physical facts, and subjective physical facts could help me to express, or grasp, or glimpse, what it is in me that has always said no to physicalism and determinism. One part of my aversion has been epistemological. I have always been sympathetic to Descartes, despite his errors, and as you point out, it is ironic to think of having to prove the existence of subjective facts since, the problem for philosophy, historically, has always been how to get from the inside to the outside!

Surely one way to place subjective physical facts on a par with objective facts is through skepticism. Prove that there are objective physical facts, now there's a trick. But this is not a satisfying answer. It is rather like saying “Oh yea, well so's your Mom!”

or more vulgarly, "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours." The essential question is how do we bridge the gulf between the public and the private? How do we place our knowledge of the private on the same footing as that of the public so that we are all sure we are talking about the same things? There's the rub. (Please check the website for the rest of Brown's response.)

**Barry Brown (B.S. Philosophy, 1980; M.S. English, 1982) lives in Nashua, NH with his wife Camille (M.A. English, 1982) and their two children, Emily, 11, and Olivia, 3. Barry and Camille both sell books for a living: Camille with Barnes & Noble since 1980; Barry with Follett Corp. since 1987. Recently, Barry returned to the classroom at Middlesex Community College in Bedford, MA where he gladly teaches English composition. Barry is a dilettante who writes screeds on a wide variety of subjects about which he is ill- or partially-informed, only some of which have been touched on by *Philosophical Conversations*."

Response from Harry Deutsch:

Barry Brown's detailed comments on my piece are terrific. It's gratifying to get such intelligent and imaginative comments from a former student—but then that's only to be expected. Unfortunately, I only have time for some brief responses to some of Brown's remarks. I hope to respond more fully directly to Brown in due course.

Brown writes that "The intriguing aspect of thinking about the use [of] demonstratives in assertions about physical facts is that in these statements, the private ~~world seems to impinge on the third person grammar~~ of the public sphere, the grammar of science." I doubt that the idea could be expressed better than this. There seem to be physical facts that have a first-person element. These range from simple examples like "The flowers have arrived here, now" to the facts of conscious experience. It may not be possible—or desirable—to describe these facts in third person language. If so, that might account for some of the problems physicalism has faced recently (i.e. the knowledge argument and the Chinese room argument). But the matter is not all that clear. Max Deutsch claims that subjectivity is not so much an indexical matter as an epistemological one. Facts are subjective when they are knowable only in a certain way. I would argue, however, that they are so knowable only because they are indexical. We go round and round about this.

After discussing Dennett's attempt to discredit the subjective side of ourselves, Brown sums up the chasm that lies between the subjective and the objective thus: "How do we get an 'us' from an 'is'?" Catchy! I'll remember that.

And the last word comes from

C.L. Gierhart (1973) [with a nod to Lao Tzu]:

I offer the following in response to the article titled "The Mind-Body Problem" that appeared in the Fall, 1999 edition of *Philosophical Conversations*.

A musician and a non-musician listened to a bit of music. The musician heard a beautiful melody. The non-musician did not.

The non-musician wondered if the melody was real. He listened to the selection again and could not hear it. He looked at the sheet music and couldn't see it. He began to suspect that the melody did not exist. He decided to put the question to the musician.

"Musician," he said, "I have listened for your melody and can not hear it. I have looked for it and can not see it. What makes you think this melody exists?"

The musician didn't answer. He was too busy enjoying the melody.

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