

# Taking Responsibility<sup>1</sup>

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But I will not give them the kiss of complicity.  
I will not give them the responsibility for my life.<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In this essay I investigate what I call the “moral lethargy of decent people”; in particular, the moral lethargy that can arise when we face taking responsibility for large-scale problems of social injustice.<sup>3</sup> The problems I have in mind have certain characteristics: they are problems of which it is true to say that no one of us caused them; and they are problems which will stay entrenched and their moral harm worsen if decent people do not take responsibility for them. My investigation focuses on two specific forms of moral lethargy: (1) instances of resistance to taking such problems on at all, and (2) instances of paralysis that can occur when we do attempt to take them on.

I believe I am not the only one who suffers some form of this affliction. Patricia Williams in her BBC Reith Lectures speaks of one version of it as a common problem. She claims

the eradication of prejudice, the reconciling of tensions across racial, ethnic, cultural and religious lines depends [in part]...upon eradicating the troublesome attitudinal divide between the paralyzing anxiety of well-meaning “white guilt” and the smoldering unhappiness of blacks who dare not speak their mind.

My aim here is to suggest a way of looking which might provide us with the insight and energy necessary to dislodge these forms of moral lethargy, resistance and paralysis. My interest comes in part from my own dilemma, but I also come from the perspective of an educator who hopes to cultivate in students both an awareness of problems of social injustice and a disposition to engage them effectively. My intention is to look at different notions of taking responsibility from the angle of moral psychology. My central thesis is that our moral lethargy may be explained to some degree by what I call our default concept of moral responsibility. My main recommendation is that we become more adept at shifting among perspectives on taking responsibility.

## RESISTANCE TO TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Sandra Bartky, speaking in the context of the United States, is also bothered by the moral lethargy of decent people. She wonders:

What goes on in the minds of “nice” white people which allows them to ignore the terrible effects of racism, and, to the extent that these effects are recognized at all, to deny that they bear any responsibility for their perpetration.<sup>4</sup>

Mindful of her own part in perpetuating unjust social practices, Bartky describes an array of “phenomenologies of denial” and the people who employ them (*SS*, 154). She includes the following: The Fantasists are those who believe that racism is already overcome. The Clueless are those “[who] have no effective understanding of racism at all” (*SS*, 156). The Culpably Ignorant are people who are in a position

to know, for example: people who commute to a racially mixed inner city from the white suburbs; people who pass through the neighborhoods of the poor twice a day; people who read newspapers which report on the plight of the poor in those inner cities; people who “need only open their eyes to the living conditions of the poor and the poorer (for example, the homeless)” (SS, 157). The Self-Deceivers are those who do know a great deal about racism and who, according to Bartky, are culpable, but not ignorant. They deny “that they bear any responsibility either for maintaining or for perpetuating the racial caste hierarchy” (SS, 159). The Fatalists are people who do not deny white racism but believe “Whatever we do bigotry and hatred will not be overcome, they will simply be recapitulated... with different victims.” (SS, 156). The Deplorers who recognize racism for the evil it is and deplore it. They are “full of sympathy for the plight of the stigmatized and despised, but make at best a few futile attempts to do something about it. deploring becomes a substitute for action” (SS, 157). To complete Bartky’s list, we have The Selfish, The Self-Interested, and The Fearful. Bartky acknowledges how much fear can be operative in our “not knowing what one knows” (SS, 163). Even when we do take steps to address our ignorance and focus on the “victims,” if we fully open ourselves to the misery of others, we cannot help but fear being swallowed up by it. She observes:

It seems that we need to walk a tightrope between a life so privatized that our sympathies reach no farther than ourselves, our families, and the occasional lost dog and an empathic identification that dissolves ego boundaries and tosses us into a frightening emotional abyss so vast that it would paralyze our ability to act (SS, 163).

Bartky herself offers some astute structural analyses to explain these forms of denial, while still insisting that such explanations do not let us off the hook. I do not deny either the importance or the necessity of grasping the structural features of the situation. I do, however, want to turn our attention to additional obstacles.

When I consider myself in relation to problems of racism and poverty, sexism and heterosexism, not to mention suffering in the third world, impending ecological disasters and our legacy to future generations, I find myself in a number of Bartky’s “phenomenologies of denial.” Her descriptions point us in the general direction of the phenomena that concern me here. While she focuses on our unwillingness to *acknowledge* our complicity in perpetuating human misery, I want to start one step further back. I start with an assumption that is logically prior to Bartky’s own. My assumption is that most of us do not want to perpetuate human misery. And so I assume to be speaking here of “good people of good will,” decent people. If we start here, within the territory of moral psychology, where might we look for personal obstacles to bearing responsibility? What hinders us at this level? One thing that may hinder us here, I suggest, is the very concept of responsibility employed to hold us accountable.

I believe our default concept of moral responsibility, the one we rely upon in our attributions of moral responsibility and blameworthiness, exacerbates the problems of resistance and stuckness. Marion Smiley calls it “the modern concept of moral responsibility.”<sup>5</sup> She claims it is held by a great percentage of the secular population as well as by large numbers of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers who write about moral responsibility.<sup>6</sup> In the absence of a consciously articulated

alternative notion of moral responsibility such as, for example, a Strawsonian account or a utilitarian concept of responsibility like that offered by Richard Brandt, the modern concept is, I believe, the inherited default notion within the Western tradition.<sup>7</sup> Relying upon Smiley's extensive argumentation, I want to call our attention to certain features of this notion of moral responsibility, which seem to me to be contributing factors in the moral emotional difficulties I am investigating.

#### ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITY AND BLAME

The first important feature, perhaps the most important feature, is the way in which moral responsibility distances itself from conventional norms and practices. Moral responsibility is seen as beyond, outside, not wholly encompassed by any social community's conventions, including conventional blaming practices. This is taken as a necessary feature if morality is to serve as an independent source for critique of conventions, legal ones included. In the words of Joel Feinberg, the terminology of *moral* obligation, *moral* guilt and *moral* responsibility express a conception of "a 'real' theoretical possibility distinct from a practical responsibility 'relative' to the purposes and values of a particular community." Thus, moral responsibility, he says, is a matter of "judgments which are in no way forced by practical considerations" and they impute "*an absolute responsibility within the power of the agent*" (MR, 74).<sup>8</sup>

Such judgments of moral responsibility, inasmuch as they impute the possibility of action within the power of the agent, can appear to be akin to a judgment of fact. But their implications extend far beyond the range of standard empirical claims because these attributions of moral responsibility also carry within them "a moral judgment about the individual in question: that she is morally blameworthy for having brought about harm" (MR, 74). William Frankena elucidates this fusion of causation and accusation characteristic of the modern concept of responsibility:

Saying that X was responsible for Y seems, at first, to be a causal, not a moral, judgment; and one might, therefore, be inclined to say that "X was responsible for Y" simply means "x caused y," perhaps with the qualification that he did so voluntarily, intentionally, etc. But to say that X is responsible for Y is not merely to make a causal statement of a special kind. It is to say that it would be right to blame or otherwise punish him."<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to its use in other traditions, such as Classical Greek and Christian notions for example, where causation/voluntariness is merely one among a number of conditions necessary for blameworthiness, the conflation of causation and moral blameworthiness is the "distinguishing mark" of the modern concept of moral responsibility (MR, 75). The operating assumption has become that, given the absence of excusing conditions, which undermine the judgment of causation, a person who is responsible is *ipso facto* blameworthy. What is noteworthy for our purposes is that "modern individuals not only conflate causation and blameworthiness into a single moral term, 'moral responsibility,' but treat the two as part of one moral fact about an individual's agency" (MR, 75). The implications of such a view are serious. Inasmuch as blameworthiness is independent of conventional practices, community standards and the social practice of blaming, it becomes a judgment that is written "into the individual's moral agency itself" (MR, 75). In other words, the individual's agency becomes the *source* of moral blameworthiness. Further, "since

it is a judgment of the individual's moral worth, it cannot refer simply to her actions but must refer to her as a person" (*MR*, 75).

Jonathan Glover clearly exemplifies this view that moral blameworthiness constitutes a moral fact about the worth of persons as moral agents. He describes it as a "kind of moral accounting, where a person's actions are recorded on an individual balance sheet, with the object of assessing his moral worth."<sup>10</sup> Glover adds, unequivocally, to say that someone is morally blameworthy for some state of affairs "is to say that he is a bad person."<sup>11</sup> Asking what this could possibly mean in a secular context, Smiley wryly notes: The notion of blameworthiness then turns out "to look very much like the Christian notion of sinfulness minus God" (*MR*, 76). With Christianity we have "transcendent souls which can be blackened by the performance of bad acts" but who, she asks, is the secular person who can be so marked? (*MR*, 78).

We can now see that attributions of moral responsibility as thus characterized entail something of a slippery slope where we slide almost imperceptibly from judgments about causation to assessments of the worth of persons. Specifically, we can note the following separable features: (1) judgments of moral responsibility are removed from and assumed to be independent of conventional social and legal norms; (2) judgments of causation are fused with moral praise/blame; which means (3) moral blameworthiness becomes a function (solely) of individual agency; which carries with it (4) a judgment of the (intrinsic) worth of the person.

Taking account of these features, we can now mark the stringent requirements that would appear to be necessary for the assignment of moral responsibility. The individual will must be free, "wholly free of external determination" if it is to be the source of blameworthiness; and the will must be capable of being intrinsically good or bad (*MR*, 78).

However much someone may or may not buy into this concept of moral responsibility, it seems clear that we cannot coherently employ it in the social political arena, rife as that arena is with contingencies and tenuous causal connections between individuals and social harm to groups. But of course we do so apply it, or we might say misapply it, all the time. My point is that there are consequences for our moral emotional lives when we make such attributions of moral responsibility without being able to meet the assumed requirements the modern notion relies upon. There are, as it were, psychological side effects to this conceptual incoherence and its misapplication.

#### HINDRANCES: RESISTANCE TO (ASSIGNED) BLAME (WORTHINESS) AND PARALYSIS

On my analysis, two of these psychological side-effects are the problems under discussion, namely those of resistance and paralysis. We can see a clear example of how this operates if we look at Bartky's discussion of "guilt by privilege."

Bartky argues that "guilt by privilege" is a variant of "guilt by complicity." In the case of guilt by privilege the thing with which I am complicitous happens to be the structure of a social totality, or "the established order." Admittedly, Bartky says, the referents for these terms "contain regions of confusion and opacity" (*SS*, 141). Nevertheless, she insists, "I am guilty by virtue of my relationship to wrong doing,

a relationship that I did not create but which I have not severed either” (SS, 142). She says of herself, “On my view I am guilty simply by virtue of being who and what I am: a white woman, born into an aspiring middle-class family in a racist and class-ridden society” (SS, 142). Bartky claims, “the very structure of everyday life places the relatively privileged in a morally compromised position, whether we know we are in it or not. One can be guilty without feeling guilty and without having authored the social arrangements that involve one in complicity” (SS, 142). This entire line of thinking, and blaming, exemplifies the modern concept of responsibility at work, specifically in its suggestion that blameworthiness is simply a matter of fact: “There is complicity involved....My role in the maintenance of an unjust social order is a fact, *whether I recognize it or not*” (SS, 142).

Bartky’s students are not receptive to such judgments. As she notes:

Most human beings do not want to feel that they are in any way guilty of perpetuating human misery. This is undoubtedly the reason that my white middle-class students respond regularly with anger, defensiveness, or denial when I suggest to them that we whites enjoy privileges that are systematically denied to non-whites. [They say] “I’ve never abused or insulted a black person!” or “My parents came here thirty years ago from Croatia: my forebears were peasants not slaveholders” (SS, 141).

Bartky admits: “My students are onto something, namely the distinction between having done something wrong and having done nothing wrong” (SS, 142). But still she insists on making what she calls the counter-intuitive claim that “one can be guilty *without having done anything wrong*” (SS, 142).<sup>12</sup>

Another feature of the modern concept of responsibility emerges here. The guilt Bartky assigns is quite like intrinsic guilt inasmuch as it can never be expunged. Bartky asks: “How much effort on the part of a person will cancel her complicity, hence remove her guilt? How can this cancellation ever be complete?” (SS, 147). Her answer, with respect to “guilt by privilege,” is clear; “in many respects it cannot be cancelled” (SS, 148). She says, “There are some inequalities from which we cannot entirely divorce ourselves no matter how hard we try. White skin privilege is a case in point. one cannot have clean hands where the polity is unclean” (SS, 148).

It is not surprising then that students feel they need to resist this notion if they are not to be defeated by it. What Bartky appears to miss in her diagnosis of students’ responses is the import of this responsibility judgment for their sense of worth as persons. They reject the implication that they are bad persons because of their relation to a social order over which they lack control. It is this judgment of their worth as persons, I believe, that is one primary source of her students’ resistance. We can sense the likelihood of this if we try on an alternative assessment of responsibility. What if, for example, we were to say to our students, or, indeed, to ourselves, “You are involved in something wrong and you are not being judged?” This alternative assessment seems less likely to invoke resistance and more likely to elicit curiosity.

Consideration of this possible alternative assessment of the situation, “You are involved in something wrong and you are not being judged,” brings to the fore another concern about the modern default concept of responsibility. Our default concept seems to obscure, or even to eclipse, key assumptions and implicit norms,

which make judgments of blameworthiness coherent. In the modern concept these are smuggled into the so-called “factual” judgments. Recall Bartky’s claim: “My role in the maintenance of an unjust social order is a fact, whether I recognize it or not.” Blameworthiness is thus established, it seems. But it is not obvious that this moral fact can be so easily established. Let us grant the necessary moral judgment about the unjust social order. We still can ask: What is it that makes me blameworthy here? There are a host of questions we need answered before our blameworthiness can be coherent. For instance: Where do we decide to begin and end the causal chain we think is relevant? If “one cannot have clean hands where the polity is unclean,” what do we take as the relevant polity? If intrinsic guilt attaches to a person by virtue of their being irrevocably attached or identified with a particular community, how do we determine the community with which they *ought* to be identified? What defines the boundaries of this community within which I am privileged? If my parents came here from Croatia does that mean I bear the same responsibility as those whose great-grandparents were slaveholders? Answers to these questions seem to be required as a support for coherent blame. In our current default concept these questions have been swallowed up by the so-called “fact” of “my role in the maintenance of an unjust social order.”

Without an accepted or agreed-upon framework within which to raise and consider these sorts of questions, judgments of blameworthiness can be paralyzing. Consider the example of Marilyn Frye who describes herself as wholly demoralized by self-blame in her efforts to respond constructively to criticisms of herself and her work as racist.

It all combined to precipitate me into profound and unnerving distrust of myself. All of my ways of knowing seemed to have failed me—my perception, my common sense, my good will, my anger, honor and affection, my intelligence and insight. Just as walking requires something fairly sturdy and firm underfoot, so being an actor in the world requires a foundation of ordinary moral and intellectual confidence. Without that, we don’t know how to be or how to act; we become strangely stupid....If you want to be good and you don’t know good from bad, you can’t move.<sup>13</sup>

Marilyn Frye’s comments testify, I believe, to the emotional fallout that can occur when we are subject to judgments of blame, from ourselves and others, in a misapplication of the modern concept of moral responsibility.

#### ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Is there some way we can side-step this sort of resistance and inertness? How might we make a shift that could increase our sense of agency? Let us consider a different perspective on responsibility. Claudia Card notes two distinguishable perspectives associated with the phrase “taking responsibility”: (1) the “backward looking” or evaluator’s perspective, and (2) the “forward looking” or agent’s perspective.<sup>14</sup> The backward-looking perspective is the one we have seen at work in the Bartky and Frye examples. Most writings on moral responsibility in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy take this perspective. It is said to be backward looking because the focus is on looking back to some previous action to judge it. This perspective is concerned with praise and blame, punishment and reward, regret, excuses and mitigation. Its paradigmatic judgments are concerned primarily with

attributions of responsibility, with determining who bears responsibility and deserves blame. The forward-looking perspective, on the other hand, “embodies a perspective of agency.”<sup>15</sup> It involves the taking on of responsibility “which can be for what has not yet occurred or has not yet been done.”<sup>16</sup> Bernard Williams has called it “the view from here.”<sup>17</sup> Of central interest to us is the point that in the forward looking sense, when we take (on) responsibility for something, say problems of social injustice, there is no assumption that we produced these problems.

We can see these two perspectives on taking responsibility at play in the following passage from Adrienne Rich. In this poem a man and woman are talking. The man, having recently realized how he is implicated in social relations and structures which have harmed women, asks his questions from the evaluator’s or backward looking perspective. The woman continues to answer him from the forward-looking perspective.

I try to understand  
 he said  
 what will you undertake  
 she said  
 will you punish me for history  
 he said  
 what will you undertake  
 she said  
 do you believe in collective guilt  
 he said<sup>18</sup>

In answer to each of his questions she reminds him of his agency with the simple words, “what will you undertake.” So too, rather than getting stuck in the paralysis and resistance to blame, rather than becoming fixated on ourselves and our justifications for what we have or have not done, we can adopt a forward looking perspective on taking responsibility. We can acknowledge the problems and ask ourselves the question: what will I undertake? Such a perspective, I claim, can be liberating at least for some of us, and perhaps for our students.

THE FORWARD LOOKING PERSPECTIVE OF TAKING RESPONSIBILITY:  
 FURTHER OBSTACLES

Imagine we do vigorously persist with the forward looking perspective, thinking thereby to jettison blame, and the stuckness of judgments that assess us as bad persons for what we do or do not do with respect to matters largely beyond our control. Imagine we undertake to do something about the problems of social injustice. We still can run into yet another psychological obstacle, another place where people can experience bewilderment, paralysis or resistance. This obstacle is the belief that to effectively take on responsibility for such problems we are required to identify with the collective within which we appear to be situated, especially when these collectives have harmed groups we aim to support.<sup>19</sup>

The pressure to so identify can come from those with whom we wish to offer solidarity, or from within ourselves. In any case, it often meets with resistance and perplexity. For example, Joel Feinberg comments on his inability to identify with other members of the white race when he writes: “I...am quite incapable of



feeling...solidarity with all white men, a motley group of one billion persons who in my mind are no more an 'organization' than is the entire human race. I certainly feel no bonds to nineteenth century slave traders."<sup>20</sup> Feinberg expresses both bewilderment and resistance; bewilderment about how one might identify as white, why one should, and resistance to identifying with a group of whom he morally disapproves. This echoes the similar protest from Bartky's student: "My parents came here thirty years ago from Croatia: my forebears are peasants not slaveholders."

Why does taking responsibility require us to identify with collectivities that have caused harm? The reasons become clearer when we consider an alternative strategy. Sometimes, it is argued, a better way to take responsibility for problems of racism, sexism or poverty is to identify sympathetically with the victims. That way we can better appreciate their hardships, sufferings, and humiliations and are more likely to feel outrage and indignation on their behalf.

This strategy, however, runs into difficulties because the "victims" still see the sympathetic identifier as part of the group collectively responsible for the harm done to them. Dwight Boyd captures the difficulty when he says: "However much I am, and experience myself to be a unique individual, I am in fact already part of a mob.... That is, I am unavoidably part of something that is doing something to me, for me, through me, as me."<sup>21</sup> Boyd's description elucidates Sue Campbell's observation that in such cases, "I may be confused at their rejection of my outrage on their behalf, failing to grasp that from their standpoint, this outrage simply manifests my failure to understand their perspective on the harm and their moral demands for my responsibility."<sup>22</sup> In short the approach fails because I fail to see myself as they see me.

Even if we allow that others may not see us wholly accurately, still, Campbell claims, knowing how others see us can be important to assessing their moral claims against us. She thus argues in favor of identification with our privileged group because then "We may at least take ourselves to be addressed by others in ways that might motivate seeing how we are understood by them."<sup>23</sup>

Campbell directs our attention to an important point—the necessity of receptivity, the necessity of moral addressability by others. But does it require our identification with groups, especially those we experience as alien? It may be true to say in some cases that these forms of identification Campbell urges can aid us in the way she suggests. But I believe we need not accept the thesis that such identifications are necessary in order to make ourselves morally addressable or receptive. Nor need we accept this thesis to grant that there are some good reasons why we cannot, or should not, entirely jettison the backward looking perspective on responsibility. The backward-looking perspective reminds us of our interdependence and keeps us cognizant of our inescapable historical continuities. However, we do still have the same sorts of bewilderment, paralysis and resistance that arose with the default concept of blameworthiness showing up when people encounter pressure to claim what they experience as an alien or inappropriate identity. If our concern is with moral agency, we again need to find a way to avoid getting stuck here.

I want to suggest another move, a different strategy, we might adopt at this point. What if we were to continue to pursue *even more* vigorously the forward-looking



perspective on taking responsibility, paying attention to the fact that it is the agent's perspective we mean to emphasize not the evaluator's. What if we were to see taking responsibility with respect to these problems as a matter of taking responsibility for oneself, not necessarily as a matter of identifying with one's group? Of course, the worries about addressability or responsiveness, recognition of interdependence and acknowledgement of historical continuities do not go away; but my claim is that we may herein find a constructive rather than a resistant strategy for working with them. It is a strategy I have found helpful for myself and one that seems to work with students.

#### TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONESELF

My aim in shifting to the notion of taking responsibility for oneself is to move past the resistance/the paralysis we experience when we are pressured to identify in a manner contrary to our own sense of ourselves. In doing so, however, I want to acknowledge three significant facts. (1) We are all both persons, individual moral agents with the ability to make choices, and members of different collectivities or "mobs" as Boyd might call them. (2) Respectful relations across differences require all parties to acknowledge each other as both unique persons and members of groups. (3) It is typical of majority or privileged persons that they/we want to see themselves/ourselves as "human beings," or unique individuals, while minority or subordinated people want to see them/us as members of groups responsible for injustice. Furthermore, one of the privileges of the majority/dominant group is that we can determine when to invoke our identity as individuals and when to invoke or simply enjoy the benefits without noticing our identity as a group member. Minority or subordinate people do not have this choice about which aspect of their identity is salient; and frequently members of the majority or dominant group are the ones to make that determination. Nevertheless, my point here is that if identification with the collectivity is something we want or even believe we need in order to effectively tackle problems of social injustice, we are unlikely to get it if we insist on it. Such insistence tends to increase resistance.

What then do I mean by suggesting we construe taking responsibility for social problems as a matter of taking responsibility for oneself? To use another formulation, what I have in mind is this: finding an alternative way to talk about what it means to begin right here where we are, in the present, in the midst of all our current resistances, conflicts, confusions and tensions. I see this as the place to start, the place where we can allow, and not forget, that we are more than our identifications, our own as well as those which others attribute to us, the place where we do acknowledge our situatedness and location.

Taking responsibility for oneself, in this sense, involves a material, historical, bodily specificity about the interconnections between our own well being and the existence of others. It recognizes that who we take ourselves to be cannot be severed from, or remains fungible with, the lives of others past and future. It is a matter primarily of recognizing and dealing with my own resistances, the internal conflicts and tensions, which if unacknowledged can operate as obstacles to my being responsive to others. Thus, I believe it can become a way that I am more likely to be responsive to others.

On the surface it might sound as though I am recommending a strategy that could land us in a worse dead-end, where there is now a narcissistic fixation on one's own character rather than on the social harms that need to be corrected. I do not deny this is a risk of my strategy. But then we also know the risks of persisting with the backward looking perspective. Being stuck in blame, self-blame or blame from others, can also keep us fixed in the wrong way—focused on ourselves and our endless justifications for why we are not to blame.<sup>24</sup> So let me undertake to make clear the merits of my approach.

The main virtue of the strategy I am suggesting is that it may make it easier for people to examine their own hostilities and resistances if they do so as a matter of being accountable to themselves. This is part of a strategy that Card has advocated for those with diminished agency as a result of their personal history.<sup>25</sup> While it may seem odd to claim that we all suffer diminished moral agency, I think it is not so far off to think of everyone in this way when we are talking about major social problems, which leave most of us feeling powerless. With respect to the social problems that concern us here, we do, all face a state of diminished agency.

Another virtue of my strategy is that it suggests individuals make their own decisions about whether and when they will use a forward or a backward looking perspective. Persons can determine this in accordance with their judgment of their own capacity to use them effectively. If I judge it to be within my capacity, I can take responsibility in the backward-looking sense. On the other hand, I might adopt a strictly present moment, action-oriented perspective. I could choose to “renounce useless guilt,” as I understand it, and get on with organizing effective actions.

But, someone might ask: what if an individual's sense of the self for which they are responsible is bounded, limited, separated; what if she does not see herself as needing to be responsive to others, in particular these others? Indeed as Megan Boler and Margaret Urban Walker have argued, it is likely that many of us will have just such a conditioned sense of self, where even our emotions have been politically shaped in part by the dominant subordinate structuring of our social relations.<sup>26</sup> It seems to me that this is exactly the reason to start here, at home, with ourselves. This is where we begin the work of self-knowledge and self-understanding in connection with social problems of injustice. It is where structural analyses can get their grip. It is not, of course, the place to end our work. Søren Kierkegaard and Nel Noddings, among others, remind us constantly that the life impulse is in the subjectivity of persons, not in theories, obligations, and structures. What Kierkegaard calls “double reflection” is a rethinking of the structures within which one finds oneself, reevaluating them in such a way that one's thinking leads to action. I am arguing that, with respect to problems of social injustice, an explicit shift to the notion of taking responsibility for oneself can provide us a way to assist our students, and ourselves, to avoid inauthenticity and practice Kierkegaard's “double reflection.”<sup>27</sup>

In the end, not everyone will be motivated to engage with problems of social injustice, to take on responsibility for these problems, in the same way. For some, blame may work and not be paralyzing, for others it will be self-defeating, get them stuck, and make them resistant. For such people, I have argued, the shift to a forward-

looking perspective could release or enhance their sense of agency. In the process, one may or may not eventually come to “identify” with their “assigned” group.<sup>28</sup> How we choose to self identify seems to me to be less important than whether or not we stay engaged with the problems. For those who get stuck around “identification,” their sense of agency might depend upon their construing the taking of responsibility for social problems as a matter of taking responsibility for their own character. Not everyone will be engaged by this move, but for some this shift in their concept of taking responsibility could be crucial to their staying with the attempts to do something about seemingly intractable problems. Wendell Berry gives us a sense of how it might work. In noting that “History simply affords us too little evidence that anyone’s individual protest is of any use,” Berry adds: “Protest that endures, I think, is moved by a hope far more modest than that of public success; namely the hope of preserving qualities in one’s own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence.”<sup>29</sup>

There are two obvious risks with my suggestions and I want to address them directly.<sup>30</sup> While these shifts in responsibility seem helpful in freeing up energy that is stuck, we do need to ask whether actions motivated from these senses of taking responsibility are likely to change (or even address) the underlying structures of inequity and oppression, because, obviously, one of the dangers in this terrain is that those of us in positions of privilege want to feel less bad or guilty or maybe even virtuous. The risk is that we want to do this without letting go of the privileges that are part of the structure that is causing harm.

I believe some actions motivated by these senses of taking responsibility could contribute, if only by prompting conversations and shifts in awareness that could lead to such change. They will do so, however, only if we can remain alert to the possibility that underneath our good intentions is unrecognized self-interest that may have led to the inertness or resistance in the first place.

Another, perhaps even greater risk associated with my strategy is whether the two alternative senses of taking responsibility I have laid out are missing a recognition of just how interdependent we, as members of privileged groups, are with members of subordinate groups with whom we are trapped in an oppressive dynamic beyond our own choosing. As members of a privileged majority we are used to being able to take effective action, either on our own or with members of our own groups, but, in this instance, in wanting to move beyond a sense of paralysis or resistance, in the case of wanting to move outside the dynamics of guilt and blame we need our counterparts to also take responsibility. Because when we look beyond the power dynamics, when we look at the possibility of creating a different future, one thing we need is a different kind of relationship with others who invoke such uncomfortable feelings in us now.

The legacy of harm is that we are alienated from our understanding of ourselves as moral beings, and from each other. Taking responsibility for oneself can help us to overcome the sense of alienation from ourselves. The best possibility, the one I hope for, is that it might free us also to reach for a different relationship with the other.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay I have concerned myself with moral emotional issues generated by taking seriously the demands of the moral life, especially with respect to problems of social injustice. My central thesis has been that our moral lethargy may be explained in part by our default concept of moral responsibility. We become resistant and/or paralyzed because we experience the side effects of the incoherence of the modern concept of responsibility. My central recommendation has been that we become more adept at shifting among perspectives on taking responsibility. I have proposed that we more often eschew the prevalent evaluator's perspective in favour of the agent's perspective. I believe the shift gives us a better chance of increasing our sense of agency with respect to the problems under consideration. In particular I have argued that it can be useful to understand this as a two-step strategy. First we shift to the forward-looking perspective. Then, if we get stuck again, we move to the notion of taking responsibility for oneself. Although I note that each shift in perspective I recommend is not itself free of problems, I do claim each merits consideration on the grounds that such a shift may be a necessary precursor to taking responsibility at all.

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2. Mary Oliver, *The Leaf and The Cloud* (Da Capo Press, 2000), 4.

3. The term "decent people" I adopt from Norman Care, *Decent People* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). In his book Care explores how our moral emotional nature moves us to seek relief from moralized pain. He does not specifically consider the effects of different notions of moral responsibility for moral emotional pain.

4. Sandra Bartky, "*Sympathy and Solidarity*" and *Other Essays* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 151. This book will be cited as *SS* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. In choosing to call this category the "Fatalists," I have altered Bartky's name and category somewhat. She is concerned with two sorts of denial within a single category she calls "Tu Quoque Racists." I have singled out the fatalistic aspect of this kind of denial.

6. Marion Smiley, *Moral Responsibility and the Boundaries of Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). This book will be cited as *MR* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. For an account of moral responsibility that, unlike "the modern concept" explains moral responsibility in terms of social practices and what he calls "reactive attitudes" see P.F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974). For attempts to develop a utilitarian conception of responsibility that leaves behind notions of causation and free will and concentrates on the consequences of blame for society see J.J.C. Smart, "Free Will, Praise and Blame," *Mind* 70 (1961): 291-306 and Richard Brandt, "A Utilitarian Theory of Excuses," *Philosophical Review* 78 (1969): 337-61.

8. Joel Feinberg, *Doing and Deserving* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 30.

9. William Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1963), 56.

10. Jonathan Glover, *Responsibility* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 96.

11. *Ibid.*

12. One might ask whether it is not more appropriate to claim that Bartky is rejecting the modern concept of responsibility rather than misapplying it inasmuch as she appears to be rejecting altogether the first

requirement of causation. Bartky's discussion is more ambiguous than I can detail here. Sometimes she suggests that we are guilty because we have not severed our connection with wrongdoing or have done nothing about the *persistence* of prejudice thus strongly implying that we have done something wrong through our inaction. Further, she nowhere indicates she rejects the modern concept of responsibility so I assume for her, too, it is the default notion.

13. Marilyn Frye, "A Response to *Lesbian Ethics*," *Hypatia* 5, no. 3 (1990): 133.

14. Claudia Card, *The Unnatural Lottery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 26

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 25.

17. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 33-34; quoted in Card, *The Unnatural Lottery*, 26.

18. Adrienne Rich, "From an Old House in America," *The Fact of a Doorframe* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 220-21.

19. Sue Campbell calls this requirement "resistant identification." Sue Campbell, "Emotion, Memory, and Political Identification," paper presented to the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy, The University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada, September 2002.

20. Joel Feinberg, "Collective Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 21 (1968): 677; quoted in Campbell, 4-5.

21. Dwight Boyd, "The Place of Locating Oneself(ves)/myself(ves) in Doing Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 13.

22. Campbell, "Emotion, Memory, and Political Identification," 11.

23. *Ibid.*, 12.

24. For a discussion of the problems blame can pose among those seeking to overcome their oppression see Sarah Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Towards a New Value* (Palo Alto, CA: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988). For a response to her view see Barbara Houston, "In Praise of Blame," *Hypatia* 7, no. 4 (Fall 1992). In the *Hypatia* paper I argue in praise of blame. However, the context there concerns more personal relationships and my argument is premised upon a Strawsonian notion of responsibility, a notion quite different from the modern concept of responsibility that lies at the heart of my arguments here.

25. Card is arguing that for those with diminished agency it can be effective to focus on inner conflicts and inner resources and, if necessary, separation from those environments which induce a sense of powerlessness. She has in mind women who suffer from a childhood history of abuse or those who need to escape seriously subordinating conditions. She sees taking such measures as part of an integrity project. I am reluctant to join with her in seeing it as an integrity project primarily because I have reservations about her notion of integrity.

26. See Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and Margaret Urban Walker, "Ineluctable Feelings and Moral Recognition," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy 22: Philosophy of Emotions*, ed. Peter French and Howard Wettstein (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

27. For a lucid discussion of Kierkegaard's notion of "double reflection," see Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

28. We can note here, with Berenice Fisher, that "The responsibility for choosing and creating identities (to the extent that we do so consciously) entails nothing more or less than taking responsibility for ourselves." Berenice Fisher, "The Search for Women Role Models," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13, no. 2 (1988), 299.

29. Wendell Berry, "A Poem of Difficult Hope," in *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 62.

30. My discussion of these risks has been shaped by conversations with Cynthia Cohen. See Cynthia Cohen, *Working With Integrity: A Guidebook for Peacebuilders Asking Ethical Questions* (Waltham, MA: The International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life, Brandeis University, 2001).