

## Glass Snakes vs. Groupals: Who is the Responsible Subject?

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### THE PRELUDE

“Moral lethargy” certainly does not characterize Barbara Houston’s efforts before us today. She has taken on the perplexing topic of responsibility in the context of “large-scale problems of social injustice” with a combination of personal courage, philosophical insight, and pedagogical caring. She works her way through a maze of conceptual problems that bid to confuse and lead people psychologically astray, particularly to emotional dead-ends of “resistance” and “paralysis.”<sup>1</sup> I share with Houston the concern that such problems constitute some of the most egregious and seemingly intractable moral/political problems of our contemporary society, and that there is too much gap between this perception and what gets done about them. Moreover, I also agree that the question of a more effective notion of responsibility that can apply to such problems is needed to close this gap.

Working her way through the conceptual maze leads Houston to the positive suggestion that “we construe taking responsibility for social problems as a matter of taking responsibility for oneself.” She acknowledges the apparent paradoxical flavor of this recommendation. That is, it would seem to be 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.” Nevertheless, she makes a strong case for the effectiveness of starting “here, at home, with ourselves.” If I read her correctly, this case hinges upon her belief that “we are more than our identifications, our own as well as those others attribute to us.” This “more” then makes room for avoiding backward-looking responsibility (and thus paralyzing blame), for choice about whether to self-identify with one’s “assigned group,” and thus possibly for increased feelings of personal agency in facing problems of social injustice.

### THE PICTURE

I will choose not to follow Houston into the conceptual maze surrounding the notion of responsibility. Instead, I want to complement her efforts by troubling the conception of subjectivity that is presupposed by that maze (and perhaps by Houston’s positive suggestions). In doing so, I will focus on only one of the several problems that Houston identifies as falling within the scope of her concern, namely, racism.<sup>2</sup> This problem seems to concern Houston centrally, and it serves well to contextualize my interest in digging under how responsibility questions are engaged. I ground this alternative approach to our shared interest in my worry, following Goldberg, that we have reason to be suspicious of racialized contamination of the very ways morality functions in/through modern discourse, especially modern *liberal* discourse, and that this might very well apply to notions of responsibility. Goldberg shows, successfully I believe, that “race has been a constitutive feature of modernity, ordering conceptions of self and other, of sociopolitical membership and exclusion [s].”<sup>3</sup> He does not flinch from pointing his

critical finger directly at the role of morality in this, despite the fact that morality is thought by many to get its *raison d'être* from being necessarily above any such contingent fray:<sup>4</sup>

These exclusions have been executed in terms of the imputations of race into various conceptions of morality, into conceptions of what sorts of behavior morality requires, and into accounts of the Moral Subject—who is capable of moral action and who is subjected to it, who is capable of moral autonomy and who is directed.<sup>5</sup>

If this is right, then insofar as we are talking about *moral* responsibility, and doing so in the context of the problem of racism itself, we have good reason to be very cautious about what kind of assumptions we make about the self as bearer of responsibility.

As essentially social animals, I think that it is arguable that human persons do not really exist except insofar as they see themselves related to each other, and that “seeing” is a cognitive one, at least to some extent. We are constituted by conceptions of how we relate to each other, and the shape that such relational-self-conceptions can take may be almost unlimited.

As a particular instance of this kind of knowing, the idea of the “liberal individual” has had remarkable strength and staying-power over the last several centuries in western societies. It has enabled (some) people to act together socially in ways unseen before, many of which are surely laudable. For example, “human rights” are essential, and often effective, moral/political bulwarks to protect against the most grievous kinds of harm that persons and institutions can inflict on particular others, and this moral leverage entered the social realm via the historical development of the idea of the “liberal individual.” In addition, for many it has also enhanced its stability by providing a comfortable psychological framework for interpreting one’s own agency and responsibility in the world of human interaction—and especially so for those like myself who have primarily benefited from the advantages of this discourse, through their location as white, masculine, middle class, and heterosexual. In fact, although often threatened, the idea of the “liberal individual” manages to survive, repeatedly demonstrating its self-protective, regenerative powers.

One might very well think of it as the “glass snake” of human self-conception. Growing up on a Kansas farm, and thus spending most of my childhood outside, led me to appreciate nature, and, in particular, the number and variety of critters that inhabit it. Most of these were quite unremarkable and could be found at some time or other in my clutches as a temporary “pet.” Bunnies, kittens, turtles, fish, lizards, and even (once) a black widow spider fit the bill quite nicely. But one such critter escaped this attention—the glass snake. This was a snake only rarely found, but one that presented quite a spectacle when found, at least by the always-present pet dog. Kansas farm dogs kill snakes, of course. Their method is to grab the snake with their jaws and shake vigorously until the snake appears to clearly embody the limpness of death. But in my experience the *glass* snake almost always won this battle. The victory was achieved not in the opossum-manner of *faking* the limpness of death in the hopes that canine short attention span would incline the dog to simply walk off in victory, and the opossum to also amble off somewhat later. Rather, the glass snake

faked death in a much more flamboyant manner: it visibly flew into numerous pieces as a result of the vigorous shaking by the dog. Now, even a dog knows that snakes do not come in multiple pieces, at least while alive. Again, the dog walks off... and eventually the boy as well. And the one essential piece of the glass snake, the one not technically classified as “tail,” the piece (though short) including all the vital organs and the head, crawls off to regenerate its whole self and live another day.

As a moral/political self-conception held by humans, the “liberal individual” surely matches the glass snake in apparently miraculous powers. In many different problematic environments it somehow manages to shed whatever is superfluous, just “tail,” and thus to avoid fatal, dogged critical attention. Sometimes it just crawls right into the thorny thicket of the practical problems of the “real world,” to emerge whole again supposedly as the only thing available to do the dirty work needed to solve the mess. It has also been seen slithering into the dense bushes of bureaucratic incompetence and inertia, to be discovered later quite healthily ensconced in the upper branches disguised as an “efficiency manager.” Or, when necessary, it rolls down the slippery slope of moral complacency, but bounces back as a “visionary leader.” And perhaps not so surprising, given its ideological origins, it often glorifies itself by sinking into the swamp of capitalistic greed and popping back up whole as “just human nature.” Finally, and most importantly here, it can also surreptitiously wiggle into one’s philosophical theorizing—even when that theorizing is about problems that would seem to present an environment hostile to its flourishing—and effectively constrict attention until any vision of its conceptual competitors fades from view.

So what is the piece that so resiliently survives as the core of this idea of how we are related to each other as social animals? I submit that in most varieties of liberalism—and certainly those that have historically had the most influence in shaping how moral/political problems are approached in contemporary western liberal societies—the vital life force of the idea of the “liberal individual” depends at least on two assumptions. These assumptions are that the essential self is constituted (at least in part) by (1) an ontologically bounded uniqueness, and (2) a capacity for transcendence of social contingency. That is, at least since Kant, the hegemonic conception of how humans should see each other focuses on the self as a unique perspective of conative, affective, and rational activity, ontologically distinct from, and equal to, all other such selves. Then, further, these unique centers of action in the world, these “individuals,” are assumed to have the capacity to stand outside of any existing kinds of collectivities of like “individuals” for the purpose of choosing to be part of them or not.

Now why does all this matter? How might it apply to the position that Houston has found herself in as a way out of the responsibility assignment maze? First it is crucial to see that racism is not an unfortunate, emergent accident of the natural “fact” of different “races” in the world. On the contrary, it is *itself* a way that humans have developed to “see” each other as socially related, one that “performs” oppression through that seeing.<sup>6</sup> As Young has articulated so clearly, racial oppression is a matter first and foremost of relationship between/among *groups*, not

discrete individuals.<sup>7</sup> But if so, how then are we to think of particular embodied instances of these relationally defined groups, the kind of self that is constituted by *that* relationality?

My suggestion is that they are qualitatively different from, and not reducible to, “liberal individuals.” They are, however, just as “real” as “liberal individuals.” And they have a name—in my theorizing at least. I call them “groupals.” They can be identified by noting how they have exactly the opposite of the two characteristics already seen as vital to the “liberal individual.” First, racialized selves are inherently *fungible*. To me this means that embodied instances of racialized groups—*qua* group member—are essentially interchangeable in their active being in the world. Indeed, racism “works” performatively, not just because identities (whether felt or ascribed) are somehow clumped together, but because action is achieved unavoidably by the proxy agency of this interchangeability (thus the “mob” metaphor in the passage that Houston quoted from me in her essay). Then, second, these entities express themselves existentially *not* via their capacity to transcend their embeddedness in a collectivity (or its “identity”), but, rather, via their enactment of how particular collectivities are established and maintained vis-à-vis others and what this relationship accomplishes in the world, namely, a collective project of oppression. In other words, to put these together, the “self” that comes to attention when we view the world through the lens of racism is fungible as a placeholder, whether dominant or subordinate, within an historical, collective, relational practice of exclusion and dehumanization of some by others.

#### THE POINT

In conclusion, what is the relevance of this picture of contrasting subjectivity to Houston’s exploration of responsibility? The point is that it is not clear to me which of these two social entities, these conceptions of relatedness, Houston is depending on in her positive suggestions. Despite her use of notions such as “structural features,” “social harm to groups,” “guilt by privilege,” and “fungible” lives, I worry that the glass snake of the “liberal individual” has indeed constricted her vision, that “groupals” are passed over too lightly as a kind of subjectivity that may have a bearing on how responsibility should be conceived. Of course, it is possible that she would reject the alternatives, or my way of identifying them, despite the fact that her language seems at time to utilize both.

This concern is *not* only semantics, however. In her terms, on the one hand I think we have very good reasons to hold the “liberal individual”—and our self-identification as such—responsible in the “backward-looking sense” for contributing to the construction of contemporary forms of racism. On the other hand, I have serious doubts that pumping up its self-centered responsibility in the “forward-looking sense” will enable *it* to “see” the form of relatedness that constitutes structural racism, and to do so in a manner that engages responsible action. The problem here is that it is ontologically oriented in the context of this kind of social injustice to “race to innocence,”<sup>8</sup> to slough off as “just tail” any and all fungibility and to seek a perspective “outside” structured group relations by focusing only on purifying its own individual racist attitudes. So, to conclude with two questions: Is

Houston depending on the idea of the “liberal individual” to take forward-looking responsible action to fight racism, or something else that is yet to emerge clearly? If the latter, will the maze of responsibility contours then itself change?

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1. Although she approaches her problem primarily through conceptual analysis, it should not go unnoticed that Houston frames her concern largely in psychological terms, often making observations that are seemingly empirical in kind. I am in favor of this discipline border crossing in general, but I think it is also important to be explicit about where, why, and how it is being done. I also think this crossing might be enriched if attention were paid to the work of those who approach the border from the other side, namely, with empirical theory and evidence in tow (and vice versa). The best example of possible useful perspectives on the problem at hand that I know of can be found in the work of Bandura. See Albert Bandura, “Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71, no. 2 (1996): 364-74; also, Albert Bandura, et.al., “Sociocognitive Self-Regulatory Mechanisms Governing Transgressive Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80, no.1 (2001): 125-35.

2. I also worry that not all of the “large-scale social problems” that Houston mentions are similar enough in kind to be dealt with as if they are faced with the same sort of “moral lethargy.”

3. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 148.

4. It seems evident to me that both Smiley’s and Frankena’s account of the “modern conception” of responsibility, as synthesized by Houston, depend on this assumption.

5. Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 148.

6. *Ibid.*, 81.

7. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

8. I am borrowing this phrase from Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, “The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women,” *The Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice* 1, no. 2 (1998): 335-52. It should be noted, however, that they use the phrase to refer to the tendency of women differently situated in structures of subordination to focus only on their own subordination to the degree that it occludes attention to their complicity in the subordination of some others.