

Forum Digest for Lectures 21 and 22 (lecture release date was May 21st)

Omissions and Collective Responsibility

It is important to distinguish two kinds of reasons for opposition to holding an individual responsible for an act that he did not perform.

Some are opposed to holding people responsible for their omissions to the same degree that they are held responsible for their actions. E.g. some think that even if it is true that I could save many lives by donating most of my disposable income to charity, I am not responsible for the deaths of those people if I choose not to give.

However, note that an omission is itself a form of action performed by an individual. E.g. if I choose NOT to give to charity, I am thereby doing something else instead. Some people who are perfectly happy holding people responsible for their omissions or failures to act will nevertheless oppose holding someone responsible for an action performed by ANOTHER PERSON. E.g. if Jane attacks John, they might criticize Jim for failing to help John but nevertheless oppose an rationale for assigning Jim with responsibility for Jane's act. This is an individualist form of opposition to collective responsibility.

Note that if you believe in collective responsibility, you must explain why one person can be assigned with responsibility for the actions of another. There are a number of ways we might do this most of which involve variations on the idea that some people can represent others and that this can confer responsibility from the represented to the representative or vice versa.

- a. Chain of Command: if one person has certain kinds of power or control over others, we might assign the former with some responsibility for the latter's acts. E.g. Hitler doesn't seem to have killed anyone directly but we tend to

think he is responsible for murder because he ordered other people to murder. In this case the Gestapo, SS etc. were Hitler's representatives qua fulfillers of his will. In a very democratic country, you might think that the chain of command runs in the opposition direction, and hence the citizens are responsible for what the leaders do because the leaders are the fulfillers of the people's will.

- b. Shared Identity: some people think that a person can be held responsible for actions or policies implemented by a group of which she is a member. Here we might want to distinguish between cases where the person:
- Did or did not choose to join the group.
 - Was or wasn't born into the group in virtue of his or her physical characteristics (e.g. race, sex) or parental control and social conditioning (e.g. religion).
 - Subscribes to the ideas which led the group to perform a given act or policy.

The relation between non-voluntary obligations of solidarity or membership and natural duties

In discussing whether non-voluntary obligations of solidarity or membership take priority over natural and voluntary duties, several people have drawn support from the following example: if you had to choose between saving the life of a member of your family or saving the life of a stranger, you should (or it would be permissible to) save your family member.

It is important to recognize, however, that this conclusion does not immediately show that obligations of membership take priority over natural duties. It could be the case that our special duties to our family members are derived from our more general moral duties. According to this line of argument, each of us is justified in showing partiality to our family members *because* this allows everyone to

participate in loving relationships, which are particularly valuable relationships. By permitting partiality, life goes better for everyone.

If I can be held responsible for something that my ancestors or country did, is there any limit to what I can be held responsible for?

In response to Lecture 21's challenge question, many students objected that it would be ridiculous if we were held responsible for all past injustices ever committed by our ancestors or country. The concern is this: while it might seem reasonable for modern German citizens to bear some special responsibility to memorialize the Holocaust (even if they were born after 1945), such logic could be extended to impose responsibilities on people for acts committed thousands of years earlier. There is a line-drawing problem.

There is no clear solution, but MacIntyre's theory does hint at a limiting principle. He argues that certain duties arise from the particular relationships and identities that make up our lives, regardless of any choice we have made—a child to a parent, a citizen to a country, etc. We might not be responsible for the wrongdoings of our distant ancestors if those ancestors do not contribute much to our life narratives.

Consider the hypothetical life narrative of a young U.S. citizen of distant Italian ancestry. It seems ridiculous to hold her responsible, through her distant Italian ancestry, for slavery in Ancient Rome. But, it seems ridiculous precisely because her Ancient Roman ancestry does not play a large role in her life narrative. On the other hand, it might seem less ridiculous to hold her responsible, through her U.S. citizenship, for wrongdoing during the Vietnam War. Perhaps by virtue of her American citizenship, she shares some responsibility to memorialize and make up for any ill-effects of the War. She bears this responsibility because the Vietnam War and her U.S. citizenship have played larger roles in her life narrative than Ancient Roman slavery and her distant ancestry.