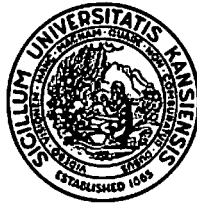# POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY AND STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE

by

IRIS MARION YOUNG

The Lindley Lecture
The University of Kansas
2003

The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

> the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living"—just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

> The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Students' Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education.* The selection of lecturers for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy.

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POLITICAL
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by

IRIS MARION YOUNG

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Political Responsibility and Structural Injustice

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The central city apartment building where Sandy, a white single mother, has been living with her two children, has been bought by a developer who plans to convert it into condominiums. The building was falling apart and poorly maintained, and she thought the rent was too high anyway, so she seizes the opportunity to locate a better place. She works as a sales clerk in a suburban mall, to which she has had to take two buses from her current residence, for a total of more than three hours commuting time each day. So she decides to look for an apartment closer to where she works, but she still needs to be on a bus line.

She begins looking in the newspaper and on line for apartment rental advertisements, and she is shocked at the rents for one and two bedroom apartments. One of the agents at an apartment finding service listens to her situation and preferences, diligently looks through listings, and goes out of his way to arrange meetings with Sandy.

Sandy learns that there are few rental apartments close to her workplace – most of the residential properties near the mall are single family houses. The few apartments nearby are very expensive. Most suburban apartments in her price range are located on the other side of the city from her job; there are also some in the city but few which she judges decent that she can afford and in a neighborhood where she feels her children will be safe. In either case, the bus transportation to work is long and arduous, so she decides that she must devote some of the money she hoped would pay the rent to make car payments. She applies for a housing subsidy program, and is told that the waiting time is about two years.

With the deadline for eviction looming, Sandy searches for two months. Finally she settles for a one-bedroom apartment forty-five min-

utes drive from her job – except when traffic is heavy. The apartment is smaller than she hoped she would have to settle for; the two children will sleep together in the bedroom and she will sleep on a fold-out bed in the living room. There are no amenities such as a washer and dryer in the building or an outdoor play area for the children. Sandy sees no other option but to take the apartment, and then faces one final hurdle: she needs to deposit three months' rent to secure the apartment. She has used all her savings as down payment on the car, however. So she cannot rent the apartment, and having learned that this is a typical landlord policy, she now faces the prospect of homelessness.

This mundane story can be repeated with minor variations for hundreds of thousands of people across the United States. There is serious shortage of decent affordable housing here; while many European countries have more active policies to mitigate market failures, there are nevertheless many people like Sandy in many advanced industrial societies. Insufficient access to decent, affordable housing is, of course, an acute problem in most less developed countries. For the purposes of this essay, however, I will assume the housing situation typical of major metropolitan areas in the United States.

Presumably most of us would agree that Sandy and her children lack a basic element of minimal well being. Many will agree with me, further, that Sandy suffers an *injustice* in the fact that access to decent affordable housing is so difficult for her. What are the grounds of that judgment? Sandy's misfortune is not due to any personal or moral failing on her part. She plays by the socially accepted rules. She has a steady job and is a dutiful employee, swallowing a good deal of pettiness and complaint about her working conditions and interactions with people in the company. She does her best as a parent, spending most of her non-job time with her children, helping them with their homework, participating in school events, and taking them to doctor appointments.

Nor is Sandy's situation a matter of sheer bad luck, like being struck by lightning. On the contrary, it is predictable that there will be an insufficient supply of decent affordable housing in an urban area with a generally healthy capitalist economy and where large scale non-profit housing investment is absent. The major causes of Sandy's misfortune lie in the normal operations of markets and institutions of planning, building, land use regulation, investment, finance and exchange in the American city where she lives. The grounds for claiming that Sandy and those in a similar situation suffer injustice,

that is, lie in the fact that her difficulties are socially caused.[1]

Some people might wish to contest one or both of these claims, but for the remainder of this essay I will assume that the condition of many Sandys describes an injustice. While socially caused, moreover, a scarcity of decent affordable housing does not result from the actions of one or a few specifiable perpetrators. Instead, this circumstance which affects many people is the outcome of the normal actions of a large number of agents – renters, home buyers, mortgage lenders, real estate brokers, developers, land use regulators, transport planners, and so on. The injustice Sandy and others suffer is *structural* or systemic.[2]

How should moral agents, both individual and collective, think about their responsibilities in relation to such structural social injustices? This essay takes some small steps toward answering this large question. First I will elaborate more precisely the claim that judgments of injustice often concern structure. Then I will answer the above question by articulating a conception of political responsibility that is different from a more common conception of responsibility as liability. Individual agents might think of their own action in relation to structural injustice, I suggest, according to parameters of connection, power, privilege, and interest.

Structural Injustice

In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls famously says that the subject of justice is the basic structure of society, which concerns "the way in which

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[1] In this account of the grounds of the claim that this person's misfortune is an injustice I have appealed in part to the sorts of reasons offered by many egalitarian theorists. Ronald Dworkin, Richard Arneson, John Roemer, Gerald Cohen, and other "luck egalitarians" argue that persons suffer injustice to the extent that their unfortunate circumstances are not their fault. To the extent that they are victims of bad luck, they argue, society in general has the obligation to compensate for their well being deficits in the form of redistributive policies and other welfare measures. In the above account of why Sandy suffers injustice I have distinguished between situations that are socially caused and those that a matter of sheer bad luck. I do not have space in this essay to defend this distinction, but I think is it very important to a theory of structural injustice.

[2] Note on terms. Some writers, such as Niklaus Luhman and Anthony Giddens, use the term "system" to denote social processes that produce and reproduce relations of inequality and hierarchy over time. Readers who wish to substitute my use of the term structural with systemic are welcome to do so if this will help follow my argument, whose focus is on the implications of this concept for a conception of responsibility. I choose not to call the social relations that result in a lack of decent affordable housing a "system" because this connotes more bounded unity than I believe corresponds to the social reality we are trying to describe. Hence my preference for referring to the causes of these circumstances as "structural processes."

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the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation."[3] Major institutions include, he says, the legal system's definition of basic rights and duties, market relations, the system of property in the means of production, and family organization. To these I would add the basic kinds of positions in the social division of labor.

Rawls says little more about what the concept of structure refers to, however. As I understand the concept, structure denotes a confluence of institutional rules and interactive routines, mobilization of resources, and physical structures; these constitute the historical givens in relation to which individuals act, and which are relatively stable over time.[4] The term structure also refers to wider social outcomes that result from the confluence of many individual actions within given institutional relations, whose collective consequences often do not bear the mark of any person or group's intention. For the purposes of using concepts of structure for thinking about justice and responsibility, I am particularly concerned with large scale or "macro" structures. If we wish to understand and criticize the way that many individuals and groups face too limited and unsavory sets of options, then we need an account of large-scale systemic outcomes of the operations of many institutions and practices that constrain some people at the same time that they enable others.

I will build up an account of structure and structural processes using elements derived from several theorists. Peter Blau offers the following definition: "A social structure can be defined as a multidimensional space of differentiated social positions among which a population is distributed. The social associations of people provide both the criterion for distinguishing social positions and the connections among them that make them elements of a single social structure."[5] In Blau's spatial metaphor, individual people occupy varying *positions* in the social space, and their positions stand in determinate relation to other positions. The social structure consists in the connections among the positions and their relationships, and the way the attributes of positions internally constitute one another through those relationships.

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[3] *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 7.

[4] I have elaborated a concept of structural processes usable for theorizing injustice in some previous writing. See *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially Chapter 3; "Equality of Whom? Social Groups and Judgments of Injustice," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 9, no. 1, March 2001, pp. 1-18; "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity," *Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, Vol. XV, no. 4, December 2002, pp. 411-428.

[5] Peter Blau, *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (New York: Free Press, 1977), p. 4.

In my example, the apartment hunter stands in a particular position in relation to other positions in the structural processes that produce, set prices for, and market housing units. She mostly experiences effects of those processes as constraints on her options. Her position is very different from that of the owner of apartment complexes or the head of a municipal zoning board, though persons in these more powerful positions also experience structural constraints.

It is misleading, however, to reify the metaphor of structure; that is, we should not think of social structures as entities independent of social actors, lying passively around them easing or inhibiting their movement. On the contrary, social structures exist only in the action and interaction of persons; they exist not as states, but as processes. Thus Anthony Giddens defines social structures in terms of "rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems."[6] In the idea of the duality of structure, Giddens theorizes how people act on the basis of their knowledge of pre-existing structures and in so acting reproduce those structures. We do so because we act according to rules and expectations and because our relationally constituted positions make or do not make certain resources available to us. Our apartment hunter Sandy, for example, has decided she wishes to live in the suburbs not only because her job is there, but also because widespread social norms and behavior identify a suburban space and lifestyle as more comfortable in many ways than that of city centers. That people act on this assumption in fact helps produce more amenities in suburbs, such as better schools and shopping centers. At the same time, action based on these assumptions helps depopulate some city neighborhoods and reduce their resource base, thus fulfilling the prophecy that they are less safe and comfortable. These judgments mediated through market processes then contribute to the situation in which Sandy finds herself, namely that she cannot afford the apartments in the neighborhoods she follows others in defining as desirable.

Defining structures in terms of the rules and resources brought to actions and interactions, however, makes the reproduction of structures sound too much like the product of individual and intentional action. The concept of social structure must also include conditions under which actors act, which are often a collective outcome of action impressed onto the physical environment. Jean-Paul Sartre calls

    [6] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 25.

this aspect of social structuration the *practico-inert*.[7] Most of the conditions under which people act are socio-historical: they are the products of previous actions, usually products of many coordinated and uncoordinated but mutually influenced actions over them. Those collective actions have produced determinate effects on the physical and cultural environment which condition future actions in specific ways. Housing options certainly are constrained by the practico-inert in this way. Past planning decisions have put highways and rapid transit rail lines in particular places, for example, and these are now part of the physical environment with significant influence on the housing market as well as home to work quality of life issues.

Reference to such physical manifestations of social structures leads us to a final aspect of the concept. The actions and interactions among persons differently situated in social structures using rules and resources occur not only on the basis of past actions whose collective effects mark the physical conditions of action. They also often have future effects beyond the immediate purposes and intentions of the actors. Structured social actions and interactions often have collective results that no one intends and which may even be counter to the best intentions of the actors. Sartre calls such effects counter-finalities.[8] Even though no one intends them, they become given circumstances that help structure future actions. Presumably no one intends that a significant number of people in a metropolitan area will be forced to scrimp on food and dental care to pay the rent, or to live in substandard apartments, or seek shelter in a community center.

To summarize, structures refer to the relation of social positions that condition the opportunities and life prospects of the persons located in those positions. This positioning occurs because of the way that actions and interactions reinforce the rules and resources available for other actions and interactions involving people in other structural positions. The unintended consequences of the confluence of many actions often produce and reinforce opportunities and constraints, and these often make their mark on the physical conditions of future actions, as well as on the habits and expectations of actors. This mutually reinforcing process means that the positional relations and the way they condition individual lives are difficult to change.

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[7] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheeridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), Bk. I, ch. 3.

[8] Ibid, pp. 277-92.

This, then, is what it means to me to say that structures are the subject of justice. Justice and injustice concern primarily an evaluation of how the institutions of a society work together to produce outcomes that support or minimize the threat of domination, and support or minimize everyone's opportunities to develop and exercise capacities for living a good life as they define it. Social justice concerns the actions of particular individuals on the policies of particular institutions only secondarily, as these contribute to constituting structures that enable and constrain persons.

Structural injustices are harms that come to people as a result of structural processes in which many people participate. These participants may well be aware that their actions contribute to the processes that produce the outcomes, but for many it is not possible to trace the specific causal relation between their particular actions and some particular part of the outcome. Some upper income urban dwellers, for example, may be aware that their decisions to buy condominiums in renovated center city buildings contributes to processes that displace lower income renters like Sandy. No one can say, however, that their decisions and actions have directly caused Sandy's landlord to sell the building to a condo developer, thus necessitating Sandy's apartment search.

Political Responsibility

Thus I come to the main question of this essay: How should moral agents – both individual and organizational – think about their responsibilities in relation to structural social injustice? This question presents a puzzle for two reasons that I referred in my account of social structure and structural injustice. First, although structures are produced by actions, in most cases it is not possible to trace which specific actions of which specific agents cause which specific parts of the structural processes or their outcomes. The effects of particular actions often influence one another in ways beyond the control and intention of any of the actors. Second, because it is therefore difficult for individuals to see a relationship between their own actions and structural outcomes, we have a tendency to distance ourselves from any responsibility for them. The dominant concept of responsibility, I suggest, operates on a liability model that seeks causally to connect an agent to a harm in order to assign the agent responsibility for it. Because the relation of any actions to structural outcomes cannot be assigned in that direct way, we have a tendency to conclude that those structural processes and outcomes are misfortunes rather than in-

justices, circumstances we must live with rather than try to change.[9]

Samuel Scheffler argues that moral sensibility and moral theory lag behind massive changes in the relationships and structures the condition people's lives. Many of the problems we collectively face are large scale structural problems, some of which cross national boundaries – global warming, volatility of financial systems, unemployment, and countless other issues. Yet the concepts of responsibility we operate with derive from and are most suited to issues of smaller scale interaction. We continue to rely on a phenomenology of agency that gives primacy to near effects over remote effects, to individual effects over group effects, and to people's positive actions more than what they have failed to do. This traditional notion of agency and the concept of responsibility derived from it, however, is not well suited to understanding and taking responsibility for the large scale social structural processes that are sources of many social and natural problems.

> What we appear to lack is a set of clear, action-guiding, and psychologically feasible principles which would enable individuals to orient themselves in relation to the larger processes, and general conformity to which would serve to regulate those processes and their effects in a morally satisfactory way.[10]

While I think that Scheffler's account of this practical and theoretical problem is sound, I doubt that what we need to solve it is a new set of principles. Instead, or at least beforehand, we need a plausible way of conceiving responsibility that connects individual agency to structural processes. I aim to offer some elements of such a conception, which I call political responsibility.

I find it helpful to contrast the model of political responsibility with a more common model of assigning responsibility which derives from legal and' moral reasoning to find guilt or fault for a harm. Under this liability model, we assign responsibility to particular agents when we show that their actions are as causally connected to the outcome for which we seek to assign responsibility. This agent can be a collective entity, such as a corporation or a government, but when it is, that en-

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[9] In some theories of justice, such as that of Ronald Dworkin, the society as a whole has an obligation to compensate for deprivations that do not derive from the choices of the individuals who suffer them.

[10] Samuel Scheffler, "Individual Responsibility in a Global Age," in *Boundaries And Allegiances: Problems of Responsibility and Justice in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 39.

tity can be treated as a single agent for the purposes of assigning responsibility.[11] The actions found causally connected to the circumstances are shown to be voluntary and performed with adequate knowledge of the situation. If a candidate for responsibility in this sense can successfully show that their action was not voluntary or that they were excusably ignorant, then their responsibility is usually mitigated if not dissolved. When these conditions do exist, however, it is appropriate to blame the agents for the harmful outcomes.[12]

A concept of strict liability departs from a fault or blame model in that it holds a person liable for an action that caused a harm even if they did not intend or were unable to control the outcome, or holds a person or institution liable for a harm caused by someone under their command.[13] I include both fault liability and strict liability in the liability model of responsibility, because they share two other features that I will use to distinguish this model from the model of political responsibility. The liability model is primarily backward looking in its purpose; it reviews the history of events in order to assign responsibility, often for the sake of exacting punishment or compensation. Assigning responsibility to some agents, on this model, finally usually also has the function of absolving other agents who might have been candidates for fault. To find this person or group of persons guilty of a crime usually implies that others who were suspect are not guilty.

I am not objecting to a concept of responsibility as blame or liability. It is indispensable for a legal system and sense of moral right that respects agents as individuals and expects them to behave in respectful ways toward others. When applying this concept of responsibility, there must be clear rules of evidence, not only for demonstrating the causal connection between this agent and a harm, but also for evaluating the intents, motives and consequences of the actions. By proposing a model of political responsibility, I do not aim to replace or reject the liability model of responsibility. My claim is, rather, that this model of responsibility is either insufficient or inappropriate for assigning responsibility in relation to structural injustice.

Let me illustrate how by referring again to the example of insuf-

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[11] Peter French, *Collective and Corporate Responsibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[12] See George Fletcher, *Basic Concepts of Criminal Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), for a clear statement of this model of responsibility.

[13] See, for example, Tony Honore, "Responsibility and Luck: The Moral Basis of Strict Liability," in *Responsibility and Fault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 14-40.

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ficient availability of affordable housing. Does it make sense to blame anyone or hold them strictly liable in a legal sense for Sandy's situation? One might argue that the landlord who has sold the building to a condominium developer is to blame. He didn't have to sell the building, or he might have done something to ensure that Sandy would nevertheless have a decent apartment that she could afford in reasonable proximity to her job. Current legal and social norms expect nothing of the sort from landlords such as this; indeed, expecting such action would itself involve structural changes that give building owners more influence over processes of housing allocation than they currently have. More generally, even though it may be appropriate to blame or hold liable particular agents at least for an aspect of the housing problems of particular persons – when they have discriminated against them, for example – there is no one in particular to blame for the general structural injustice of inadequate access to decent affordable housing for all. Vast numbers of actors contribute to the processes that produce this outcome, many of them with little awareness of how their actions contribute. The desire of young affluent professionals to move back to center cities from outlying suburbs, for example, gives incentives to investors to finance developers to convert old buildings into luxury condominiums. Each agent moves on their own interests within the existing legal and social norms, and their actions together contribute to the outcome that some people are displaced and have difficulty finding decent affordable housing. None ought to be *blamed* for that outcome, I am suggesting, because the specific actions of each cannot be causally disentangled from the structural processes to trace a specific aspect of the outcome.

The assignment of responsibility as liability is an indispensable aspect of moral judgment. People do all sorts of irresponsible and harmful things, out of indifference, sloppiness, malice, selfishness or self-righteousness. A complete account of what happens to poor working people seeking housing should include many specific wrongs perpetrated by isolatable agents, though many of them would be within legal bounds. The liability model of responsibility, however, is inadequate for understanding and evaluating much about the relationship of individual actors to large scale social processes and structural injustices. It needs to be supplemented with a notion of responsibility that implicates persons in the effects of structural processes because they participate in the production and reproduction of those structures. Thousands of actors in a metropolitan area

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and outside it contribute to the market, policy, and symbolic processes that produce the predictable outcome of a shortage of decent affordable housing in easy commuting distance from jobs. Most of these actors feel constrained by structures in their own decisions and outcomes. While together they produce the outcomes, they do not intend the consequence that denies some people a decent apartment, and many in fact condemn or regret such outcomes. A concept of political responsibility says that we who are part of these processes should be held responsible for the structural injustice, as members of the collective that produces it, even though we cannot trace the outcome we regret to our own particular actions in a direct causal chain. A concept of political responsibility fills this role without attributing blame.

When I designate this concept "political responsibility," the term "political" refers to something wider than what state institutions do. I use the term more in a sense like Hannah Arendt. For her, the political refers to phenomena and movements of collective action, where people work together to form public works and institutions. The making of state institutions, and using them to enact collective goals, is often an important means of enacting political responsibility, but do not exhaust the concept or its organizational possibilities.

I have five features that distinguish the concept of political responsibility from a liability model: (1) political responsibility does not isolate some responsible parties in order to absolve others; (2) whereas blame or liability seeks remedy for deviation from an acceptable norm, political responsibility concerns structural causes of injustice that are normal and ongoing; (3) political responsibility is more forward looking than backward looking; (4) what it means to take up or assign political responsibility is more open and discretionary than what it means to judge an agent blameworthy or liable; (5) an agent shares political responsibility with others whose actions contribute to the structural processes that produce injustice.

(1) Unlike a blame model, political responsibility does not seek to mark out and isolate those to be held responsible, thereby distinguishing them from others, who by implication then are not responsible. Such isolation of the one or ones liable from the others who are not is an important aspect of legal responsibility, both in criminal and in tort law. Because they argue that organizations or collectives, as well as individuals, can be blamed for harms, as well as individual persons, most accounts of collective responsibility aim to distinguish those who have done the harm from those who have not.

When harms or injustices have no isolatable perpetrator, but rather result from the participation of thousands or millions of people in institutions and practices that result in harms, such an isolating concept of responsibility is inadequate. Where there are structural injustices, finding that some people are guilty of perpetrating specific wrongful actions does not absolve others whose actions contribute to the outcomes from bearing responsibility.

(2) In a liability concept of responsibility, what counts as a wrong for which a perpetrator is sought and for which he or she might be required to compensate, is generally conceived as a deviation from a baseline norm. Implicitly we assume a normal background situation that is morally acceptable, if not ideal. A crime or an actionable harm consists in a morally and often legally unacceptable deviation from this background structure.[14] The process that brought about the harm is conceived as a discrete, bounded event that breaks away from the ongoing normal flow. Punishment, redress, or compensation aims to restore normality or to "make whole" in relation to the baseline circumstance.

A concept of political responsibility in relation to structural injustices, on the other hand, evaluates not a harm that deviates from the normal and acceptable, but rather often brings into question precisely the background conditions that ascriptions of blame or fault assume as normal. When we judge that structural injustice exists, we are saying precisely that at least some of the normal and accepted background conditions of action are not morally acceptable. Most of us contribute to a greater or lesser degree to the production and reproduction of structural injustice precisely because we follow the accepted and expected rules and conventions of the communities and institution in which we act. Often we enact these conventions and practices in a habitual way, without explicit reflection and deliberation on what we are doing, having in the foreground of our consciousness and intention immediate goals we want to achieve and the particular people we need to interact with to achieve them.

(3) Political responsibility differs from a liability model of responsibility in being more forward looking. Blame and praise are primarily backward looking judgments. They refer back to an action or event assumed to have reached its terminus. Most often the purpose

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[14] See George Fletcher's discussion of the way that the assignment of criminal liability must distinguish between foregounded deviations from background conditions assumed as normal.

of assigning responsibility as fault or liability is to sanction, punish or exact compensation from those liable. To be sure, such backward looking condemnation and sanction may have a forward looking purpose; we may wish to deter others from similar action in the future, or to identify weak points in an institutional system that allows or encourages such blameworthy actions, in order to reform the institutions. Once we take this latter step, however, we have left a liability model and are moving toward a conception of political responsibility. The reform project likely involves responsibility of many people to take actions directed at those reforms, even though they are not to blame for past problems.

Political responsibility seeks less to reckon debts than to bring about results, and thus depends on the actions of everyone who is in a position to contribute to the results.[15] Taking political responsibility in respect to social structures emphasizes the future more than the past. Because the particular causal relationship of the actions of particular individuals or even organizations to the structural outcomes is often not possible to trace, there is no point in seeking to exact compensation or redress only from those who have contributed to that outcome. The injustices produced through structures have not reached a terminus, but rather are ongoing. The point is not to look back at who did it, but rather to look forward to an intervention in the process that will change it.

There is an important sense, then, however, in which political responsibility must be backward looking. An understanding of how structural processes produce and reproduce injustice requires understanding the history of those processes, often looking far into the past. The purpose of this analysis of past events is not to find perpetrators, however, but rather to understand how actions and policies have long term effects and how the effects can solidify into structures that conditions new actions.

(4) Political responsibility is relatively open with regard to the actions that count as taking up the responsibility. It is distinct from duty in this sense. Like duties, responsibilities carry a burden and an obligation; carrying out responsibilities is not a matter of mere beneficence. Unlike duties, however, responsibility carries considerable discretion; one *must* carry out one's responsibilities, but *how* one does so is a matter for judgment according to what the responsibilities are for, the

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15 Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 90-120.

capabilities of agents, and the content of action.[16] As Henry Richardson observes, the relatively open and discretionary character of some responsibilities follow from their forward looking character; the future is unpredictable enough that one must be prepared to change a course of action because of unanticipated consequences.[17] Similarly, Robert Goodin argues that responsibility differs from duty in being more outcome oriented. A duty specifies a rule that an agent should follow. One has fulfilled the duty if one has performed the required actions. Carrying out a responsibility, on the other hand, consists in seeking to bring about a specified outcome. It is possible to act in accord with rules of morality and yet not have discharged one's responsibilities, because one has not achieved the required outcomes even though it is feasible to do so.[18]

(5) Political responsibility, finally, is responsibility shared in specific ways. As Larry May theorizes, the concept of shared responsibility is distinct from the concept of collective responsibility in that the former is a distributed responsibility whereas the latter is not. A collective of persons, such as a corporation, might be said to be responsible for a state of affairs without any of its constituent individuals being responsible as such. Shared responsibility, on the other hand, is a personal responsibility for outcomes or the risks of harmful outcomes, produced by a group of persons. As May sees it each is personally responsible for the outcome in a partial way, since he or she alone does not produce the outcomes; the specific part that each plays in producing the outcome cannot be isolated and identified, however, and thus the responsibility is essentially shared.[19]

May's treatment of shared responsibility is largely backward looking. He reflects on how persons who have not themselves been directly guilty of a harm such as a hate crime, may nevertheless contribute by their attitudes and actions to fostering a social environment in which such harms appear more acceptable than they might otherwise. If we follow my claim that political responsibility is more forward looking than backward looking, then the shared nature of the political re-

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[16] Joel Feinberg, "Duties, Rights and claims," in *Rights, Justice and the Bounds of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 137.

[17] Henry S. Richardson, "Institutionally divided Moral Responsibility," in Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul, *Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 218-249.

[18] Robert Goodin, "Responsibilities," in *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 81-87.

[19] Larry May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Chapter 2.

sponsibility refers primarily to the relationships with others that the responsibility involves. Taking political responsibility means acknowledging that one participates in social processes that have some unjust outcomes, and one participates with many others. Discharging the responsibility entails enjoining collective action with at least some of these others. We share responsibility to organize means of changing how the processes work so they will issue in less injustice. State institutions are often a most effective means of taking collective action to change structural processes, but government policy usually requires the active support of communities to be effective in its aims. The form of responsibility, then, is political in these senses that acting on my responsibilities involves joining with others in a public discourse in which we try to persuade one another about courses of collective action that will contribute to ameliorating the problem.

An important corollary of this feature of political responsibility is that many of those properly thought to be victims of harm or injustice may nevertheless have political responsibility in relation to it. In a fault model of responsibility, blaming those who claim to be victims of injustice functions to absolve others of responsibility for their plight. In a conception of political responsibility, however those who can properly be argued to be victims of structural injustice can be called to a responsibility that they share with others in the structures to engage in actions directed at transforming the structures. Indeed, on many issues those who might be argued to be in less advantaged positions in the structures ought to take the lead in organizing and proposing remedies for injustice, because their interests might be argued as the most acutely at stake and their social position offers them a unique understanding of the likely effects of policies and actions proposed by others situated in more powerful and privileged positions. In the next section I will elaborate this distinction of kinds of responsibility based on social position.

Conceptualizing political responsibility as distinct from blame is important not only philosophically, but also for the sake of motivating political action. Frequently the reaction of people being blamed for a wrong is defensive – to look for other agents who should be blamed instead of them, or to find excuses that mitigate their liability in those cases where they must agree that their actions do causally contribute to the harm. Such practices of accusation and defense have an important place in morality and law. In many contexts where the issue is how to mobilize collective action for the sake of social change and greater justice, however, such rhetorics of blame and finger-pointing

displacement lead more to resentment and refusal to take responsibility than to useful basis of action. Banks that engage in redlining practices or landlords that fail to maintain the buildings they own should certainly be blamed for the effects their actions have on housing markets or living conditions, and should be punished in some way. Efforts to level blame for a generally tight market in affordable housing in a given metropolitan area, however, are more likely to create divisions among the agents that must work together toward remedies. Public discourse in our society is altogether too full of accusations of fault and the defensiveness and resentment such accusations usually produce.[20]

Kinds and Degrees of Responsibility

Some people might object to the conception of political responsibility I have outlined on the grounds that it seems to make nearly everyone responsible for nearly everything. Most of us participate in a number of structural processes that arguably have disadvantaging, harmful or unjust consequences for some people in virtue of our jobs, the market choices we make, or other activities. Surely it is asking too much, the objection runs, for each of us to worry about all these modes of participating in structures and how we might adjust our lives and relation to others so as to reduce their unjust effects. Our relation to many of these structural processes is so diffuse, and the possibility that our own action can effect a change in outcomes is often so remote, that it is more reasonable to limit our moral concern to matters where we stand in direct relation to others and can see clearly the effect of our action on them.

One parameter of thinking here refers to the degree of injustice. Where basic rights are violated in a widespread fashion over a long term, moral agents have greater responsibility to take action directed at redress than for lesser injustices.

Approaching such structural injustice, we can appeal not to pre-assigned tasks that people have, but rather to their institutional or social *position*. What might be required from one's position is doing

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[20] William Connolly appeals to an idea of responsibility as a corrective to a resentment politics that seeks to blame some agents for social harms. See Connolly, *Identity/Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), especially Chapter 4. Melissa Orlie also distinguishes between a sentiment of resentment exhibited in blaming, on the one hand, and holding oneself and others political responsible. See Orlie, *Living Ethically, Acting Politically* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 169-173.

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something different from or additional to the tasks normally assigned to that position, but different persons nevertheless stand in differing positions in structures that produce unjust outcomes, which afford them different opportunities and capacities for influencing those outcomes. I suggest that persons can reason about their action in relation to structural injustice along parameters of *connection, power, privilege,* and *interest.*

Connection – The theory of political responsibility argues that agents have forward looking responsibilities to take action to help undermine structural injustices not on the general grounds that right thinking people should be concerned about harm and suffering wherever it occurs, but on the more specific grounds that we are connected by our own actions to the processes that cause injustice for others. It is not obvious to the individual home buyer or renter that his or her location preferences and income allocation decisions may contribute to limiting the housing options of others, but in aggregate they often do, and home buyers and renters can become and often are aware of this. Faced with such an understanding of the outcomes of housing market processes, some people claim that these are matters of fate, or that the market will produce the best outcome for housing consumers in the long run. Certainly there is room for disagreement about just what are the structural causes of a lack of access to affordable, decent housing for significant numbers of people, and about what kinds of actions would best remedy such injustice. Political responsibility at this reflective moment of recognizing the connection of actions to outcomes, however, requires at least that the collective discuss these issues with an eye to collective action to improve the situation.

Power – A person's position in structural processes usually carries different degrees of potential or actual power or influence over the processes that produce the outcomes. Organizations and institutions, moreover, vary in their power and ability to influence structural processes. In structural processes producing and reproducing housing options, for example, certain government officials, corporate executives, property owners, all holding positions in particular types of institutions, have more power to influence these processes and influence their transformation than others. The power and influence parameter for reasoning suggests that where individuals and organizations do not have sufficient energy and resources to respond to all structural injustices to which they are connected, they should focus on those where they have more capacity to influence structural processes.

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More powerful individuals and institutions, of course, often have more interest in maintaining the status quo than changing the processes and their outcomes. For this reason individuals and organizations with relatively less power but some ability to influence the powerful individuals and institutions need to take responsibility actively to pressure the more powerful to take responsibility for change.

Privilege – Where there are structural injustices, these usually produce not only victims of injustice, but persons who acquire relative privileges by virtue of the structures. Most who occupy positions of power with respect to the structures also derive privileges from this power. In most situations of structural injustice, however, there are relatively privileged persons who have relatively little power as individuals or in their institutional positions. Affluent home buyers or renters, for example, stand in a relatively privileged position in housing markets, especially compared with persons unable to locate decent affordable housing in reasonable distance from their workplaces. As housing consumers, however, they have less power than government officials, or financial officers, or heads of major real estate broker firms to influence and thus contribute to the transformation of structures. Persons who benefit relatively from structural inequalities have special moral responsibilities to contribute to organized efforts to correct them, not because they are to blame, but because they are able to adapt to changed circumstances without suffering serious deprivation.

Interest – People and organizations usually have different interests in the maintenance or transformation of structural injustices. Ironically, often those with the greatest interest in reproducing the structures are also those with greatest power to influence their transformation. Those who are victims of structural injustice have a great interest in structural transformation. Earlier I said that one of the distinctive things about a concept of political responsibility is that victims of injustice may nevertheless have political responsibility in relation to it. Those who suffer injustice have the greatest interest in its elimination, and often have unique insights into its social sources and the probably effects of proposals for change. To the extent that those with significant interests in transformation and those who are harmed through structural injustices have more insight and determination in such transformative projects, their voices should have particular influence in organizations and movements that aim to change the structures.

In this essay I have distinguished two conceptions of responsibil-

ity, a liability model and political responsibility. Each is an important conception and has different purposes. A concept of political responsibility is particularly relevant for holding ourselves and others accountable for structural injustice, because such injustice is usually the product of many actions whose consequences are unintended and whose exact authors are difficult to trace. Political responsibility is a shared responsibility, which can best be discharged through collective action. It is nevertheless individually distributed: transformation in structures that produce or perpetuate injustice can occur only when many individuals take responsibility for making such transformation.

The following lectures have been published in individual pamphlet form and may be obtained from the Department at a price of $5.00 plus $1.00 for handling ($6.00 per lecture).

* Pamphlet out of print.
† Reprinted in *Freedom and Morality*.
†† Printed only in *Freedom and Morality*.