

Original Sin, Collective Responsibility, and Complicity in Wrongdoing

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Abstract:

Many reject the Augustinian doctrine of original sin on the grounds that it is not fair that all of us should be subject to penalty for no other reason than that the earliest human beings sinned. In this essay, I put forward an interpretation of this doctrine that largely removes the stigma of perceived unfairness. Doing so requires an investigation into two areas of ethical theory, collective responsibility and complicity in wrongdoing.

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The Augustinian doctrine of original sin states that all human beings have been affected by the sins of the earliest human beings. This doctrine is widely interpreted as identifying the earliest human beings as those present in the Garden of Eden. In addition, it is interpreted as stating that all of us come into the world with an inherited sin and that all of us are subject to penalty as a result.

The Roman Catholic Church subscribes to this doctrine, holding that Adam was the representation of the whole human race. Many Protestant denominations likewise teach the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, including Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Methodists.

It should come as no surprise that many reject this doctrine on the grounds that it is not fair that all of us should be subject to penalty for no other reason than the fact that the earliest human beings sinned. According to Michael Rea, the doctrine conflicts with the intuitively plausible principle that a person is morally responsible for a state of affairs obtaining only if it obtained and the person could have prevented it from obtaining (Rea 2007, 320).

Leibniz has defended the doctrine from the charge of unfairness. He poses this question: Couldn't God have replaced Adam and Eve after they sinned with better people, and wouldn't this action have prevented their sins from being transmitted to generations in the future? His answer is that if God had done this, a very different set of circumstances would have taken place, such as different marriages, and different people would have been born. Accordingly, our very existence

depends upon God's tolerating the sins of Adam and Eve, and it would be the height of folly for someone to become a complainer at God for doing so (Leibniz 1967, 128).

Leibniz draws an analogy between such a complainer and someone who is angry at his father, who is of noble birth, for marrying a lower-born wife, not realizing that another person would be in the world instead of him if his father married a different wife.

Despite these arguments, the Augustinian doctrine of original sin is widely believed to be unfair. In the remainder of this essay, I will put forward an interpretation of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin that largely removes the stigma of perceived unfairness. Setting the stage for the interpretation I propose will require an investigation into two major areas of ethical theory, collective responsibility and complicity in wrongdoing.

To avoid confusion, there are two ways in which the term "collective responsibility" is commonly employed. Sometimes what is meant by saying that some people are collectively responsible for what happens is that each is individually responsible for what happens. When several people break the windows of an abandoned building, for example, they can be said to be collectively responsible for the broken windows.

The term "collective responsibility" can also be assigned to a single entity, the collective consisting of the people who form or constitute it. If one employs the term in this manner, one is saying that people are collectively responsible for what happens just in case the collective consisting of those people bears responsibility for what happens. The people need not all be individually responsible for what happens; what is claimed is that they belong to a collective that bears responsibility for it. It is the second sense of the term that is relevant to the following discussion.

Consider these words from Karl Jaspers' book, *The Question of German Guilt*: "There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each of us co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do everything I can to prevent them, I too am guilty" (Jaspers 1961, 36). By all appearances, Jaspers is embracing a theory of responsibility that includes all human beings. Larry May believes that Jaspers comes "dangerously close" to saying in this passage that all human beings share responsibility for all of the harms in the entire world (May 1992, 148). Another philosopher who subscribes to a theory of collective responsibility that is practically universal in scope is Jerzy Jedlicki. He argues, for example, that people frequently bear responsibility for the wrongdoing of their ancestors, even distant ancestors (Jedlicki 1990, 53ff).

In 1993, after a physician who performed abortions was shot and killed by an antiabortion protester, a reporter for National Public Radio claimed that all Americans are collectively responsible for failing to do more to prevent violence at abortion clinics. Claims of this sort are relatively common in the media and in people's conversations. We frequently hear claims that various groups are collectively responsible for unfortunate events that have occurred, groups that are often vast in number. Hearing a person claim that all Americans are collectively responsible for a phenomenon such as the national deficit or failing to deal with the problem of homelessness is so commonplace that few pay it any attention.

Claims of this type are rarely challenged. People appear to believe that they are true and seem willing to acknowledge that they themselves are members of a vast collective responsible for various problems plaguing society. When a commentator for National Public Radio asserts that all Americans are collectively responsible for not doing more to deal with violence at abortion clinics, the typical listener probably has little inclination to doubt this claim. And when someone asserts that every living person is collectively responsible for working to solve environmental problems, the average response is likely a failure to see any need to question this claim.

On occasion people speak up to challenge assertions that assign collective responsibility to vast numbers of people. Stanley Bates has argued against all-inclusive accounts of collective responsibility. His example is the claim that white Americans are responsible for the horrible racial situation in America (in 1970). This claim is false, according to him, since his infant white daughter, “does not seem to be a candidate for this kind of moral responsibility.” He then adds the following: “Perhaps we should say something like ‘mature, rational, white Americans who know what the racial situation is, and who either take actions to perpetuate or worsen it, and who fail to take actions to alleviate it, bear moral responsibility for the situation’” (Bates 1971, 348).

I believe that we may obtain a deeper insight into the declarations of philosophers such as Jaspers and Jedlicki by turning to the notion of moral taint. The basic idea is that someone who commits wrongdoing sometimes taints those to whom he or she is connected. For example, an entire family could be tainted by the criminal activities of a son or daughter. Of course, the reputations of family members are damaged by these criminal activities, but there is more to the story.

Anthony Appiah believes that moral taint is produced when a person’s actions bring about harm and the contagion of the person’s wrongful actions is transferred to someone else who has no involvement in these actions. Consider the much-discussed events of the Holocaust. The vast majority of German citizens had nothing to do with these events, but, according to Appiah, they were nevertheless tainted by the actions of the Nazis. As a result, they suffered a loss of moral integrity. Appiah believes that a person’s own moral integrity is affected or impacted when someone else causes harm to occur, and there is some connection between these two persons.

Moral taint presupposes community; it involves a person’s link to others in the community. People who are tainted by the actions of others to whom they are linked need not feel guilt, according to Appiah. If one has no personal involvement in what happens, or if one bears no moral responsibility for the outcome, it is not appropriate for one to feel guilt. Nevertheless, Appiah believes that it is appropriate for one to feel shame (Appiah 1991, 219-238).

Moral taint can shed light on situations where someone such as an ordinary German citizen fails to bear personal moral responsibility for harms committed by others. Presented with all-inclusive claims about collective responsibility, one might fear that the concept of responsibility has been watered down to the point where claims about responsibility are easy to shrug off. However, turning one’s attention to the concept of moral taint can help address this fear, because it provides us with the resources for describing the moral status of persons connected to others who are guilty of wrongdoing.

Moral taint is a weaker concept than moral responsibility. As such, it has the potential for allowing one to describe the moral status of those who have no involvement in the wrongdoing of others. This includes others who have committed wrongdoing in the distant past. A person might be tainted by the wrongful actions of a distant ancestor, but he or she is not morally responsible for those wrongful actions.

Paul Ricoeur's discussion of defilement describes essentially the same concept. He believes that defilement is a symbol of evil: "Defilement is to stain or spot what lustration is to washing It is a symbolic stain" (Ricoeur 1967, 36). If someone is defiled by the stain that attaches to his or her criminal brother, it is by virtue of symbolization. The defilement that attaches to the person is a symbolic stain; it is symbolic of the stain that attaches to him.¹

Turning now to complicity, the topic of complicity has become part of the political conversation to a degree that is perhaps unprecedented. The claims that are made in the media are frequently extravagant or all-encompassing. Recently Gideon Levy wrote that, "All Israelis are complicit in the occupation of Palestinian land."² James M. Doyle proclaimed in *The Crime Report* that, "We are all complicit in George Floyd's death."³ Claims of this nature seldom seem to be contested.

Consider this quotation from scholar Breytan Martin: "We are all complicit We are complicit in police brutality. We are complicit in the making and maintaining of the prison industrial complex We are complicit in Black and Brown death. We are complicit through our inaction."⁴ One can argue that if nearly everyone is complicit in nearly every harmful situation, then the concept of complicity has become watered down to the point that it becomes easy to shrug off. While I am somewhat sympathetic to this line of reasoning, my approach is different. Elsewhere I have defended the claim that a person becomes an accomplice to someone's wrongdoing only if that person contributes to the outcome of the wrongdoing in question either by action or omission, and the contribution need not be a causal contribution. My goal is not to refute the all-encompassing claims illustrated by Levy, Doyle, and Martin. Instead, I aim to show that there is a plausible alternative.

My account of the essential characteristics of complicity is the following: There is always a principal actor and one or more persons that contribute to the outcome of the principal actor's actions that render them accomplices to the wrongdoing of the principal actor. What a person does that renders him or her complicit can be called a contributing action, with the stipulation that an omission can qualify as a contributing action. The blame an accomplice bears for performing a contributing action can be distinguished from the blame an accomplice bears for the outcome. While there are cases in which an accomplice bears no blame for the outcome, an accomplice always bears moral responsibility for performing his or her contributing action.⁵

The authors of comments about complicity quoted earlier will not agree that the notion of contributing action or inaction is the proper criterion for determining whether someone qualifies as an accomplice. Consider the claim about Israelis occupying Palestinian land. Many Israelis are complicit in this state of affairs, some by reason of making decisions. No doubt others are complicit

by way of contributing inaction. But Gideon Levy writes that all Israelis are complicit, and it is hard to see by what criterion he judges that this is the case.

It might be wise to acknowledge that Levy, Doyle, Martin, and many others are expressing pain, frustration, or impressions of injustice in verbalizing their claims about complicity. These claims might not conform to accepted standards of criminal complicity or moral complicity. But they are heartfelt and should not be dismissed as frivolous statements to be taken lightly.

No one should be surprised that my recommendation is to make use of the resources of moral taint. Levy's assertion that all Israelis are complicit in the occupation of Palestinian land will no doubt infuriate many people. But suppose that this assertion is interpreted as saying that all Israelis are tainted by those directly involved in occupying Palestinian land. Given Appiah's analysis of the notion of taint, this assertion implies that all Israelis have reason to feel shame for what those directly involved have done, and this assertion seems plausible.

James M. Doyle writes that all of us are complicit in the death of George Floyd. Some might react to this as an assertion that is inflammatory. Others might find it ridiculously overblown. Nevertheless, as a claim about moral taint, it could have the appearance of a reasonable proposition. Saying that we are tainted by the actions of Derek Chauvin is to say that we all have reason to feel shame for what he did, and this claim seems quite defensible.

The remarks of Breytan Martin can be treated in similar fashion. She maintains that we are all complicit in police brutality, the making and maintaining of the prison industrial complex, and black and brown death. Judging that we are tainted by the perpetrators of these activities does not seem far-fetched, given our links to the community. Feeling shame for what they have done appears quite appropriate.

Levy, Doyle, and Martin have framed their statements in the language of complicity, and they no doubt do not intend their statements to be interpreted in the language of moral taint. My aim in this section has simply been twofold: To point out that the criterion of contributing action or inaction presents an alternative perspective regarding complicity, and to point out that their statements are quite plausible when interpreted as assertions about moral taint.

It is time to return to the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. As noted earlier, there are many who reject this doctrine on the grounds that it is unfair that all of us are subject to penalty because of the sins of the earliest human beings. However, if the doctrine is interpreted in terms of moral taint, the appearance of unfairness is largely removed. Given the idea that Adam was the representative of the whole human race, we are all connected to him in such a way that we can be tainted by his sins. As a result, it is appropriate for us to feel shame. According to Ricoeur's way of thinking, if we have been defiled by Adam's sins, the defilement takes the form of a symbolic stain. Although the doctrine has been controversial for centuries, interpreting it in terms of taint or stain rather than culpability renders it more plausible.

Some might balk at Appiah's conviction that the moral integrity of those who are tainted by another's wrongdoing is affected or impacted. Others might wonder what exactly is meant by saying

that taint affects people's moral integrity. My answer is that this feature of Appiah's account does not need to be regarded as essential to the concept of moral taint. In particular, one can accept the view that we are tainted by Adam's sins without agreeing with Appiah's views regarding moral integrity.

Recall the principle that a person is morally responsible for a state of affairs occurring only if the person could have prevented it from happening. According to Rea, this principle is intuitively plausible and conflicts with the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. However, when the doctrine of original sin is understood in terms of moral taint, it no longer conflicts with the principle cited by Rea.

One who accepts this version of the doctrine can rest content in the knowledge that we are not morally responsible, nor are we subject to penalty, for the sins committed in the Garden of Eden. We are tainted by these sins, and that is how we are affected, no more and no less. Perhaps more will be drawn to an acceptance of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin with the realization that there is a plausible alternative to its orthodox interpretation. Those who wish to remain faithful to the denomination in which they were raised could benefit in similar fashion. They could discover that the teachings of that denomination do not entail that all of us are morally responsible for the sins committed in the Garden of Eden.

Endnotes:

1. For more on collective responsibility see Gregory Mellema, *Collective Responsibility* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).
2. Gideon Levy, "All Israelis Are Complicit in the Occupation," www.haaretz.com/opinion/2022-04-21.
3. James M. Doyle, "We are all complicit in George Floyd's death," <https://thecrimereport.org/2020/06/01>.
4. Breytan Martin, "We are all complicit," www.brown.edu/public-humanities/blog.
5. For more detail, see Gregory Mellema, *Complicity and Moral Accountability* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), chapter one.

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