RESPONSIBILITY FOR JUSTICE

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Avoiding Responsibility

In chapter 4 I elaborated a social connection model of shared responsibility in relation to structural injustice. This is a forward-looking model of responsibility that, because it is essentially shared, can be discharged only through collective action. It is a *political* responsibility because it involves enjoining one another to reorganize collective relationships, debating with one another how to accomplish such reorganization, and holding one another to account for what we are doing and not doing to undermine structural injustice.

In chapter 5 I analyzed ways of thinking about such social positions, and argued that both the degrees and the kinds of forward-looking responsibility for changing structural processes to produce less injustice vary according to parameters of power, privilege, interest, and collective ability. No one who participates in processes that produce structural injustice is exempt from responsibility to join with others to change those structures. Some are less inclined to do so, however, because their positions give them more interest in preserving than in changing them. Others stand in positions of relative weakness in the structures. The former must usually be pressured to take steps aimed at changing the effects of their actions, and the political responsibility of the latter often can mount to little else than organizing to criticize and pressure more powerful actors.

Changing structural processes that produce injustice must be a collective social project. Such collective action is difficult. It requires organization, the will to cooperate on the part of many diverse actors, significant knowledge of how the actions of individuals and the rules and purposes of institutions conspire to produce injustice, and the ability to foresee the likely consequences of proposed remedies. One or more of these conditions is often absent. But something else often stands in the way of trying to bring about these conditions, namely the attempt by participants in the process to deny that they have a responsibility to try to remedy injustice.

This chapter explicates and analyzes typical strategies agents use to avoid responsibility in relation to structural injustice. I discuss four such strategies: (1) reification; (2) the denial of connection; (3) the demands of immediacy; and (4) the claim that none of one's roles calls for correcting injustice. I will explain how in each case the structure of action in society makes each avoidance strategy intelligible and makes its recurrence likely. We can, however, produce more awareness about such strategies of avoidance in talking to one another about responsibility and collective action, and in holding one another accountable.

Reification

People who participate in social processes frequently deny the suggestion that we bear responsibility in relation to them on the grounds that we confront forces that give us no choice but to act as we do. City councillors pass a zoning ordinance in the face of reliable predictions that it will cause some displacement of lower-income renters, saying that they must do so to attract commercial developers to the city. City officials say that they are forced to sell public assets because the bond market has fallen. Workers feel forced to take a pay cut and feel lucky not to be laid off when their company introduces a new production technology that requires less skill from individual workers.

Reification consists in actors' treating products of human action in particular social relations as though they are things or natural forces. We then react to the constraints we experience, or sometimes the opportunities for action they make possible, as like spiritless natural causes, little different in principle from the weather. They are objective facts we must deal with. More often than not, it is some kind of markets that we describe this way. We trade commodity futures as though they themselves are things, rather than predictions about what people will be willing to pay for things. We front the realities of the labor market with hope for good luck, and pray that the movement of the stock market doesn't eat up too much of our pensions. Market relations are not the only socially produced processes that we tend to reify, however. Popular discussions of the prospects of a politician or political proposal, for example, often describe "public opinion" as like a general force that shifts mysteriously.

I derive a concept of reification in the first instance from Karl Marx. He introduces the concept to describe a particular aspect of capitalist commodity relations. Capitalism splits the relationship between the moment when a commodity goes on sale in the market and the moment of its purchase. Mediating between these moments is a general process of the circulation of commodities, when exchange processes establish the general equivalences among things put on sale that Marx calls exchange-value. While each exchange is supposed to be between equivalences, this separation of sale from purchase in generalized markets introduces the possibility of inequalities, as well as the possibility that the exchange-value of some goods will never be realized. Commodities come to appear as spirited things that command actions, and persons who enter the market appear as instruments of the process.[1]

Marx describes capitalist relations of production as being reified in relation to the experience and action of individual workers. The factories, the technologies introduced in them, and the technical know-how that has broken down the production process to make an assembly-line organization all confront the worker as material facts that he or she faces at work and that command and control his or her motions. In fact, these are all themselves products of social labor, made possible for factory owners and managers to mobilize by the sale of products previously made from which they have garnered a profit. The origin of the forces of production in these social relations becomes submerged in the experience of their materiality.[2]

Georg Lukács systematized this concept of reification into a general account of capitalist society and thinking.[3] Although his theory of calculative thinking specific to capitalist industrial society is fascinating, it is too focused on criticizing modern philosophy and science for our purposes of thinking about action in relation to social structures. The reification ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre, himself influenced by Lukács, are more useful for the purposes here.

1. See Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 208–209.

2. See Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, appendix, 1054–1055.

3. See Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

As I mentioned in chapter 2, in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre describes the social world as assemblages of practico-inert reality. Most of the material environment in which we act consists of products of action, praxis. People act in relation to one another mediated by these things, but they often are not acting as a collective with a common project. Individuals or groups have their own goals and move along their own trajectories. Their actions mediated by things nevertheless have collective effects wider than their intentions, and sometimes these effects thwart enactment of their individually formulated projects. Sartre calls this phenomenon *counter-finality.*

He weaves many examples through the tough threads of his theory. One follows the process in which some Spaniards accumulated gold plundered from the New World. Many individual actors bring gold into the country with the aim of getting rich. The cumulative effect of this activity, however, is that the value of gold falls, and the prices of goods rise. Holders of capital then take action to try to cut their own losses. One common action is to lower the wages they pay to workers. Being separated and unorganized, the workers experience these changes as a fact against which they have no defense. They become more impoverished, and epidemics spread, killing many of them. Through this series of events, the employers have produced the opposite of what they wanted. They have lowered the standard of living and exposed the population to famine and disease, thus bringing about a manpower crisis. "We can also observe here," Sartre says,

> in this elementary form, the Nature of reification. It is not a metamorphosis of the individual into a thing, as is often supposed, but the necessity imposed by the structures of society on members of a social group, that they should live the fact that they belong to the group and, thereby, to society as a whole, as a molecular statute. What they experience or do *as individuals* is still, immediately, real *praxis* or human labor. But a sort of mechanical rigidity haunts them in the concrete undertaking of living and subjects the results of their actions to the alien laws of totalizing addition.[4]

4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), 176.

To generalize, then, reification is a process in which the materialized product of the collective effects of the actions of thousands or millions of persons confronts those or other persons in a thing-like manner. The accumulated product of social action appears to each as a fact or force that is what it is even when its movement and changes are roughly predictable.

When I invoke reification as one manner of avoiding responsibility in relation to structural injustice, then, I am not suggesting that these modern mediated social processes that Marx and Sartre describe could take place without becoming reified. Reification is an objective result of the actions of many people, which have material effects because of their combination. For people to experience these effects as alien, like natural constraints, in that we must deal with them in trying to accomplish our aims, is not a bit of false consciousness. The materialism and objectivity of the way collectively produced effects condition individual and group action is not a fog that can be lifted with the right education.

It is only when we act as though these social processes and their effects do not originate with human action or are unchangeable that reification serves as a means to avoid responsibility for injustice. If we simply *accept* that market processes generate inequalities, or that people tend to sort themselves into in-groups related to out-groups in ways that limit the opportunities of some people, to take two examples, then reification functions as an excuse to accept the harm or disadvantage of certain groups because it is as futile to try to change these processes and their outcomes as it is to try to prevent earthquakes.

While reification is an unavoidable process, it is nevertheless possible and morally and politically desirable for people to try to de-reify their understanding of social processes and their effects. As I have suggested in previous chapters, this involves identifying the specific kinds of agents and actions that contribute to processes that produce outcomes we regret or judge unjust, and then discussing and debating with one another what actions would need to be taken by a self-conscious collective in order to change those processes. One reason I brought forward the example of the anti-sweatshop movement in the previous chapter is that I think this movement has succeeded in de-reifying the globalized production and trade processes to a significant extent.

Denying Connection

Another common strategy for claiming that I have no particular responsibility for the harms that come to other people is to deny that there is a connection between them and myself. For me to assume responsibility for what happens to others, I must have a direct and visible connection to them, on this understanding. Of course I am responsible for the effects of my actions on people with whom I directly interact. I must take responsibility for how my words may sting them, or for the risks to which I may subject them by my movements. If I provide a service for them I should do so conscientiously, and follow through with them to make sure that the outcomes are satisfactory. I should care for and support my family members and cooperate with my co-workers. Many people would not restrict the scope of connection that some people have with others to those persons with whom a person directly interacts. There may be people whom I never or seldom meet with whom I cannot deny a connection. Suppose I am an executive who makes some purchasing and policy decisions for a firm, and these decisions directly affect workers on the factory floor. Some are laid off because of a change in marketing strategy, and the hours of work change for others. I cannot deny a connection with them, even though I have not met them.

It is typical for people to deny a connection, however, with distant others who act together with them in institutions and processes mediated by many other people and things. Sure, it may be true that my interest in relocating to the central city makes a small contribution to the incentive structure that induces a landlord to sell to a condominium developer, thus displacing some renters. But it is not my responsibility to try to improve the opportunities of lower-income housing consumers, because I have no connection to them.

No doubt you will recognize a similarity between such thinking and thinking that restricts responsibility to a liability model. The above accounts assume that the scope of a person's responsibility includes all and only those persons and potential harms with whom an agent has a direct relationship, either through interaction or by virtue of something like a chain of command. I have developed a social connection model of responsibility as distinct from responsibility as liability precisely because there are good reasons to distinguish such direct connections from more mediated connections. These are not reasons, however, to claim that no kind of responsibility comes with these more diffuse and mediated social processes to which we contribute.

In her constructivist moral theory, Onora O'Neill proposes a practical test to answer the question "To whom must we (or I) accord ethical standing in taking an action?"[5] O'Neill argues that this question cannot be answered metaphysically, by identifying beings with the attributes that make them worthy of moral standing. Nor should it be answered subjectively, by an agent's consulting her feelings of affiliation or commitment, because people tend often to exclude from those feelings persons who should come within the scope of their obligations of justice. Instead, O'Neill proposes an objective pragmatic test: An agent has obligations to any agents or subjects—or perhaps creatures—about whom they make implicit or explicit assumptions as a basis of their own activities. By our own actions we commit ourselves to assumptions that there are other agents who affect our circumstances. These assumptions are not usually in the foreground of our consciousness, which is instead focused on the objectives we aim to achieve and on the persons or beings with whom we directly interact in pursuing those objectives. Indeed, it is often in our interest to deny that we make such assumptions if we are called to account for our actions and their effects. O'Neill suggests that we make three kinds of assumptions about specific others as a basis for most of our activity: that we are connected to others in the sense that the actions they take affect our circumstances and that ours affect the circumstances of others; that these others are independent sources of reaction or agency; and that these others have specific and finite capacities, dispositions, and vulnerabilities.

Let me return to the example of clothing production and consumption. By the simple act of buying a shirt I presuppose the actions of all those people who are involved in growing the cotton, making the cloth, gathering the cutters and sewers to turn it into garments, the cutters and sewers themselves, and all the agents involved in shipping the garments and making them easily available to me. Normally these people are not within the scope of my concern, but if asked I will acknowledge that but for them there

5. Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chapter 4.

would be no ready-made shirts here before me. When I look for less expensive shirts, I presuppose all those practices of pressure and competition that minimize labor costs, as well as those that purportedly increase productivity of production and distribution. To the extent that these practices result in harming workers, my intention to buy cheap shirts is implicated in that harm, even though I do not intend the workers harm, and even when I plausibly judge that my own constrained circumstances make it necessary for me to buy either inexpensive clothes or none at all. Because my actions assume all these others are acting to the result that there are clothes in nearby stores, these others come within the scope of my obligation, whether I like that or not.

O'Neill reflects on a common fact about people: when others request that we act differently because our actions adversely affect them, or when we are called to compensate for the costs of our actions on the circumstances of others, we often deny an obligation to them. Common forms of such denial are to deny that we are connected with them, or to attribute abilities to them which our actions deny. In response to the plight of sweatshop workers, for example, some people say that these workers have the ability to quit. We attribute consent to workers whose real-life options are to put up with horrid working conditions and low wages or to leave their children without food. Each form of denial, says O'Neill—that is, denying connection and denying the vulnerability of the other—"is an intellectually and ethically disreputable way of seeking to modify and manipulate the scope of ethical consideration; each can play a powerful part in strategies of selfishness, self-centeredness, self-defense and even self-deception. Each may mask what activity acknowledges, and substitute a distorted account of its presuppositions."[6]

It is common, for example, for people to acknowledge the kind of connection that brings with it obligations of justice only to persons with whom one has explicitly entered into agreements or with whom one feels affiliation. It is also common, when people are pressed to take responsibility for the way presuppositions or consequences of one's actions may harm others, for them to respond that it is up to the others to take responsibility for themselves. O'Neill's account shows that to the extent that we *depend* on them, as demonstrated by how we assume that they are acting

6. O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 107.

in specific ways as the basis of our own actions, we are obliged to attend to their well-being.

The Demands of Immediacy

A different stance might acknowledge that we are connected to millions of strangers by our participation in structural processes that condition the lives of all of us. Those adopting this stance might admit that on the basis of this connection in principle and in the abstract we have responsibility for promoting justice in relation to those others. The difficulty is, however, that there is not enough time. Our attention and energy is entirely absorbed by the demands that relationships of immediate interaction make on us.

My days are filled with people in front of me, speaking with me, demanding or hoping for responsive action from me—family members, friends, co-workers, clients or customers, the people I encounter on the bus, on the street, in shops and cafes, in places of worship, or at the clubs I attend. I try to be responsible to each person who commands my attention in my interactions with them. I try to listen, to be considerate of their needs, to be polite, respectful, and cooperative. I often fail in these aims, however. I disappoint my children, or cut off a conversation before the other is satisfied; I am curt with some people, or thoughtlessly slight them; I treat people with indifference or in merely instrumental ways; I express anger, or impatience, that I later regret because I had no justified reason.

Often I cannot suspend immediate interactions with others while I take a wider view of social relations and consider issues of structural injustice as they affect people whom I do not encounter. The moral demands of immediate interaction are pressing and constant, and sometimes feel limitless. Surely it is asking too much for me to add responsibility for injustice to these interactive responsibilities.

Emmanuel Levinas thematizes this feeling of tension between the general responsibilities of justice and our more concrete responsibilities to particular persons in interaction. Levinas's philosophy is notoriously oracular and complex, and it is not my purpose to try to provide a proper exegesis of his ideas. I will only briefly summarize his understanding of the relationships between

justice and immediate interaction as I read it in his text *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*.[7]

Phenomenologically, I experience responsibility most primordially in embodied encounters with other persons. Being in the presence of another calls me to responsibility as I look into the depth of their eyes, sense the vulnerability of their flesh, apprehend their neediness and desire. I find myself opening toward them in communicative gestures of acknowledgment or welcome prior to the substance of any proposition. Levinas calls this a moment of Saying prior to and as a condition for what is Said—an approach to another, an expression of their present claim on my attention, a greeting freely given without any expectation of reciprocity. Levinas refers to this as a proximate exposure to the other: "The immediacy of the sensibility is the for-the-other of one's own materiality, it is the immediacy or the proximity of the other. The proximity of the other is the immediate opening up for the other of the immediacy of enjoyment, the immediacy of taste, materialization of matter, altered by the immediacy of contact."[8]

This proximate relation to the other brings responsibility as prior to freedom. I do not choose to take responsibility for the other; rather, I find myself already responsible. This asymmetrical and anarchic relation to the other is ontologically prior to self-consciousness and even prior to the possibility of egoism or selfishness, as one modality of response to the responsibility. This responsibility for the other emerges from sense and desire, from being embodied in a world with other needful embodied beings. I experience the other person's need and desire as infinite in relation to my own vulnerability.

But there is a problem. Every person I encounter calls me to the same kind of responsibility. Into the infinite relation between self and other intrudes the call of a third. The third for Levinas connotes all the others whose singularity also demands attention even as I am involved with this particular other. Every other is an irreducible and unique locus of need and desire. Paradoxically, being attentive to that singularity in every case creates the need to compare them, weigh their needs in relation to one another, and

7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1981).

8. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, 74.

calculate the possibilities of distributing response across them. Considerations of justice come into play.

> The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow.... The other stands in a relationship with the third party, for whom I cannot entirely answer, even if I alone answer, before any question, for my neighbor....
>
> The Third party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction. It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness. Justice is necessary: that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and intellect... a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice.[9]

A proximate relation to the other as singularity and the equivalence and comparability of all the others are both necessary dimensions of responsibility. The former, moreover, is necessary for the latter; only because we experience immediately the singularity of the other person do we arrive at the position that all of these singularities require equal attention. Yet bringing the demands of justice to consciousness in the form of comparing people's situations and needs to one another does violence to the incomparability of each singular subject.

As I read Levinas, this is an irreducible, even tragic, tension in moral life. We must both pay attention to justice and pay attention to the immediate and potentially infinite claims of each individual person. When we acknowledge both dimensions of responsibility, it is impossible to say that we ever *discharge* our responsibilities, that the ledger is ever balanced. A first response to responsibility for the other and for justice, then, is to allow them to pull on us without assigning priority to one over the other, and without trying to dissolve the tension between them.

In chapter 2 I argued that a theory of responsibility for justice properly distinguishes between two levels of social relations: an interactive level and a structural level. Each is a way of understanding ourselves in relation to others, each is a point of view important for moral action, and one cannot be reduced to the

9. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, 157.

other. Each, furthermore, can tend to obscure the moral requirements of the other. In everyday life it is easy for the immediacy of interaction with particular others to overwhelm our attention and energy, leaving little room for taking a broader social view and for thinking about how we need to organize and coordinate our actions so that their collective consequences might do less harm to some with whom we do interact and many others whom we do not encounter.

If those of us who stand in relatively privileged positions in social structural processes give priority to the demands of immediacy, however, we are likely to reinforce some of that structural privilege in our interactions. Structures of class, race, ability, and even, to a certain extent, gender operate such that many of the persons whom most of us encounter in ongoing interactions occupy similar structural positions to ourselves. They live in well-to-do neighborhoods like us, or in racially marked neighborhoods like us; they work in occupations of similar status, and so on. When structurally privileged people attend to one another's claims and needs, they often contribute to the maintenance of their structural positions. Recognizing this fact does not constitute a reason to begin ignoring or withdrawing attention from the structurally similar people whom one encounters. It is a reason, however, to be aware of the dynamics of the reproduction of privilege and oppression and to take self-conscious action.

Let me call attention to another variation on this tension between the immediate and the structural that people sometimes experience in their efforts to respond to structural injustice. It is not uncommon for people who are organized to oppose a policy or action that they believe contributes to injustice, or who call to account people whom they identify as particularly powerful in the structures, to experience a deflation in their will to resist when they interact with individuals in positions of power or relative privilege. The CEO comes to talk to the striking workers; the head of the planning department goes to the meeting of angry residents who are worried about being displaced. Until now the political group organizing around its legitimate interest and/or trying to undermine injustice has thought of this person simply as the occupant of a position; now they see the person as cordial, humorous, attentive, and generally "nice"; or they experience the person as ordinary, on a level with themselves, or perhaps even fragile.

It is difficult for many of us to retain an attitude of anger, resistance, criticism, determination to struggle, when we interact with persons to whom we consider ourselves politically at odds. We may feel disarmed, especially as other people question our being demanding and critical of these persons by arguing to us that they are very decent people. People in positions of significant power in relation to some institutions that contribute to structural injustice often are decent people in terms of personal interaction. Sometimes people yield to the temptation to dehumanize political opponents precisely in order to inoculate ourselves against the inevitability of feeling sympathy for them if we respond attentively to them as persons. We may develop hatred for them, or at least construct them as the agents who perpetrate injustice.

In this phenomenon we see another reason for distinguishing a level of interaction from a social-structural level of judgment. It will not do to collapse them in either direction, that is, to construct some individuals as guilty of structurally caused harms or to abstain from confrontation and criticism of others for the part they play in structural harm on the ground that face-to-face they are charming and respectful. We must call one another to account if we are to change the structural processes, but we can do so without attributing malevolent intent to, or hurting, the persons we criticize.

I have followed Levinas in suggesting that a tension between the moral demands of interaction and those concerning justice is inevitable. I can conclude this section by noting that there is at least one way to reduce the tension, though not eliminate it. When the persons with whom we interact in everyday life engage with us in projects directed at organizing and acting to reduce structural injustice, then sometimes the attention and energy we put into being personally responsive to others is at the same time attention and energy devoted to political responsibility for justice.

Not My Job

I said earlier, in chapter 1, that the judgment that some people suffer injustice entails the judgment that the harm that comes to them is socially caused, and that somebody ought to do something about it. When the injustice is a consequence of social processes in which most who participate pursue their chosen objectives within

institutions whose rules they accept and follow, however, that injustice is impersonal. We cannot identify a few particular agents who have produced structural injustice, nor can we isolate a few agents who should do something about it. This is what it means for responsibility for injustice to be shared among all those who contribute by their actions to the social processes that produce it.

This situation supports another typical way of avoiding responsibility. Agents who contribute to structural processes that make some people vulnerable to domination or deprivation may regret these outcomes. We may even affirm that this harm constitutes socially caused injustice and is not simply a matter of arbitrary bad luck. Thus we may affirm that somebody should do something about the injustice. But we are sure that it is not ourselves. While we have many assigned and assumed responsibilities, none of them calls for tackling structural injustice.

I have many tasks and obligations, either because of relations I am in that I have not chosen or because of commitments I have voluntarily undertaken. I must make sure that my children are clothed, fed, and emotionally secure. I must fulfill the terms of my employment contract and act to make sure that the purposes of my job are accomplished. I should be an informed voter. Unless I work for an organization whose mission is explicitly devoted to responding to some structural injustice, however, none of my roles calls for doing something about injustice.

As I discussed in chapter 5, this fact is often part of the problem that contributes to structural injustice. The way existing roles and positions are defined allows social actors to contribute to injustice even when they do not know it and do not intend to, or at least allows them to be indifferent to the unjust outcomes of social processes. Most of us can reasonably say that the rectification of injustice is not our job in particular. If we agree that there is injustice, however, then we are saying that *somebody* ought to do something about it. As Robert Goodin remarks, if somebody ought to do something about a harm, but the task has not been assigned to anyone in particular, then "we are all responsible for seeing to it that it be done."[10] This is precisely what it means to say that the responsibility is shared. This also shows how the responsibility is a political responsibility. We all share this responsibility not by

10. Robert Goodin, "The State as a Moral Agent," in *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

virtue of our particular capacities, institutional roles, relationships, or commitments, but because we have the responsibility *in general* as *citizens*, which does not necessarily mean as citizens of a particular nation-state, but rather as participants in social processes that we hope will do justice to us and thus whose justice we are obliged to promote. We are members of societies in which we desire to be active participants, and not merely buffeted by uncontrolled forces. A general responsibility for justice accompanies all of our particular roles and responsibilities; it is not something over and above them.

Goodin argues that situations in which many people agree that there is injustice or that some people wrongly suffer harm, but where there is no one whose assigned task it is to address these problems, are just the sorts of situations in which it is appropriate for the state to act. In these circumstances, we who share responsibility for the harm have a coordination problem. We are not organized in such a way that the relationships among our actions lead to a morally good result; our actions need to be organized and the division of tasks and responsibilities assigned so that we achieve a different collective outcome. Libertarian-oriented theories of the state say that the state's purpose and proper sphere is primarily negative: state coercion is necessary and justified in order to support and secure basic liberties by making sure that individual agents do not interfere with the rights of others. Goodin argues that the "not my job" problem grounds an additional, more positive purpose for state action. A major function of state institutions is to solve the coordination problem that such situations present. States organize agencies that assign jobs specifically to address large-scale social problems. They pass tax laws to fund such activities and regulation designed to create incentives and disincentives for various actors to do things that together will help address the problem, and otherwise facilitate coordination among individuals and institutions in ways that reduce harmful outcomes. States can be particularly successful in solving coordination problems because they can exercise legitimate coercive power. This gives agents who wish to do their part in an ameliorative endeavor some confidence that others are doing their part as well.[11]

This argument is important for showing why we should think of state action as having positive purposes of trying to support jus-

11. Goodin, "The State as a Moral Agent," 28–44.

tice and not merely negative purposes of keeping actors from interfering with one another's liberties. There is no question, moreover, that a large collective of persons who recognize that the combination of their actions sometimes leads to outcomes unjust to some people should often rely on state action to rectify such injustices. I find two respects in which this argument is incomplete, however.

First, it does not respond to structural injustice that crosses nation-states. As I discussed in the previous chapter, many academics and political actors believe that transborder structural social processes contribute to many structural injustices in many parts of the world. While there do exist international institutions, of which states are members, to regulate some of these processes or institute programs to ameliorate their effects and potentially transform their operations, currently most of these institutions are either very weak, or, if strong, their operations tend to be biased by the interests of big world players such as multinational corporations and great-power states. As I have emphasized before, responsibility for justice is not grounded in common membership in a political community; rather, it calls for pushing authoritative and coercive political institutions in directions that remedy injustice, where they exist, and bringing them into being where they do not. For current global injustices, states, international organizations, private nongovernmental organizations, activist organizations of volunteer citizens, and private for-profit organizations all need to constitute a public for debating proposals for change and coordinating their implementation. Such publics do exist today for some issues, such as HIV/AIDS, absolute poverty, and working conditions that violate human rights (these issues are connected, of course). Discussions in them are and ought to be conflictual, and they do not have sufficient material and organizational support to adequately respond to the injustices they address. But they point at what is possible, and demonstrate how many agents need to make addressing injustice their job in order even to constitute such publics.

This brings me to the second problem with the appeal to the state as a response to an injustice by members of a collective that see some structurally caused harm that they regret but deny to be their job to fix. Typically, when people judge that injustice exists but claim that it is not their job to rectify it, they do not think that it is no one's job. Instead, they think that it is the government's job

and that they can continue doing what they do while the government does its job of promoting justice and welfare. In the twenty-first century, people tend to rely on a political history in which some governments have been relatively successful at fashioning regulatory regimes that aim to promote fair outcomes, or have provided a wide array of goods and services, from bridges to health care. In some postcolonial societies, however, such state capacities have never been well developed, and in other societies with a history of strong welfare states, these capacities have been seriously eroding in the last thirty years, to a large degree because powerful private corporate interests argue that such strong states inhibit growth.

So what is missing from the "It's not my job—it's the government's job" position is the recognition that the state's power to promote justice depends to a significant extent on the active support of its citizens in that endeavor. In the twenty-first century, after more than a quarter-century of the privatization of many state assets and activities, the restructuring of tax systems, spending reductions on infrastructure, support for inefficient bureaucracies, and reductions in various forms of public assistance, many states in the world have lost some of the capacities they once had to respond to social-structural problems, or have been unable to develop those capacities. Continued and arguably enhanced global reliance on military spending as a tool in international relations and as a means of controlling populations inside countries also distorts state capacities. It seems to be easier for states to coordinate action for the sake of containment or destruction than for the sake of bringing diverse private actors to contribute to reorganizing their relationships to reduce injustice. If we want our states to take the more difficult positive actions, then citizens must be willing to pay for them. Even further, we have to debate about the ways to do it and hold diverse private actors as well as public agencies accountable for enabling or impeding effecting coordinated action to minimize structural injustice.[12]

In this chapter I have reviewed four typical strategies that persons and institutions use to distance ourselves from responsibility, even when we recognize that there are structural injustices. Some

12. At this point, Young noted, "Lesson of Katrina: letting government languish until there is a crisis. Or two cases, Katrina and... earthquake in Turkey."

people reify the processes, treating them as analogous to natural forces that are beyond anyone's control. Often people who are objectively connected to others by their participation in and reliance on structural processes nevertheless deny such connection at a level of discursive social consciousness. We all experience a tension between the demands of interaction and the practical requirements involved in undermining structural injustices; the moral demands of immediate interaction occupy most of our attention, making it difficult to take a more macro view of social relations and to act with others in relation to them. Undermining injustice, finally, is not part of what most people include among their everyday duties. This gives most of us reason to say that it is not up to us to take specific actions, coordinated with others, to redress injustice.

Each of these strategies offers actors excuses for not trying actively to change structural processes and considering how we might engage politically with others to develop joint action to that end. I have argued in earlier chapters that this form of responsibility does not concern guilt, blame, or fault. The question easily arises, however, whether persons who use the above strategies to avoid taking responsibility shouldn't be blamed or faulted for doing so. Even here, though, I would want to be cautious about employing rhetorics of blame.

I have tried to articulate these excuses in a way that makes them recognizable as our own, as common, and perhaps even as aspects of moral social consciousness that are almost unavoidable. Each excuse offered as a reason has a truthful basis. Each exhibits difficulties in linking individual consciousness and action to macro-social processes. Practices of blame often operate implicitly to position the one blaming as superior to the one being blamed. This is why Nietzsche considers blaming an exercise of the will to power. If practices of blaming do distinguish those more and less morally righteous, and if the excuses I have articulated are common, then it seems inappropriate to level blame at persons who voice these excuses.

Once more I am inclined to distinguish blaming from criticizing and holding accountable. The exercise of political responsibilities that follow from an understanding that most of us contribute to social processes that produce injustice entails exposing one another's bad faith when we offer such reasons as explanations for why we should not be expected to take actions to try to rectify injustice.