
Review

Burdens of political responsibility; narrative and the cultivation of responsiveness

Jade Larissa Schiff

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Beyond its deeply engaging narrative style and lightly worn erudition, what most strikes the reader of Jade Schiff's *Burdens of Political Responsibility* is the author's authentic struggle with the urgent question that underpins the book. That is, how do we, as political theorists who share a planet replete with injustice, articulate the responsibility that citizens of the global north have for global injustice in a manner that will help and motivate us, and help us motivate others to respond to such injustice? Schiff appreciates that assuming such responsibility is an onerous process, mediated by a number of modes of resistance. Her book is thus both an exploration of the conditions that impede responsiveness and an invitation to imagine how we might negotiate those impediments and thus cultivate responsibility.

Departing from the insight that stories can both elucidate and conceal, *Burdens of Political Responsibility* explores and assumes for its own methodology the idea that the stories we tell (to ourselves and others) about others' suffering 'can facilitate or hinder' (p. 13) responsiveness. Schiff takes this insight seriously as one not only to explicate but also perform, infusing the conceptual work of the book with personal and contemporary political stories, to fashion a narrative that is theoretically illuminating and affectively engaging. Here one can discern the extent to which Schiff has been inspired by the phenomenological tradition and the affective turn in political theory. Responsiveness, she insists, is not only cognitive – it is 'an affective stance involving attunement to the suffering of others and openness to acknowledging and experiencing the claims that such suffering might make upon me' (p. 34).

A poignant illustration of this approach is Schiff's account of discovering that a suit she is about to wear to an interview was manufactured in a sweatshop – a story she weaves through the entire text. The incident elucidates a number of features of political responsibility – its action at a distance, its ubiquity and everydayness, the conflicts that arise between our acting on the insight that we are implicated and fulfilling our own projects. Beyond its illustrative value, the brilliance of the story, consistent with Schiff's recognition of the importance of mimesis and metaphor in



political argument, is that it conveys the materiality of the responsiveness she is inviting us to assume. The burden Schiff experiences after reflecting on the origins of the suit is not merely cognitive. It is somatic: she feels its weight on her body; its heaviness prevents her from getting on with life as if disconnected from the onerous conditions of her assumed freedom. Or more accurately, it so prevents her so long as she *experiences* its heaviness – a sensation that waxes and wanes as she, like all of us is subsumed taken up by the thoughtlessness, bad faith and misrecognition that characterise everyday life.

This attention to experience is itself grounded in the book's theoretical approach, articulated particularly clearly in the critical engagement with Iris Marion Young's analysis of structural injustice and the discussion of globalisation. Her reading of Young, to whom she is clearly indebted, welcomes Young's articulation of an expanded conception of responsibility that can account for the entanglement of multiple and distant actors in the production and maintenance of injustice – Young's social connection model. Schiff's critical move is to insist that so long as our implication in structural injustice is limited to being an object of theoretical insight, we will not take the further step of *assuming* responsibility. This latter move requires *cultivation* and this takes place on the ground of first person experience. Similarly, on globalisation, Schiff takes readers past the admittedly necessary and helpful analyses of the forces and shifts that we have come to call globalisation and invites them to wonder how these shifts are experienced by those who suffer injustice and by those who might or might not respond to such suffering.

After laying out the terrain of political responsibility, the book moves to its principal theoretical heavy lifting of interrogating the barriers to responsiveness. The three that she explores in conversation with the theorists from whose *oeuvre* she draws them – thoughtlessness (Arendt), bad faith (Sartre) and misrecognition (Bourdieu) – are what she calls 'species' of the more general genus of 'covering up' (p. 34), as Heidegger called it. To each she dedicates a distinct chapter, but all three operate according to a similar logic. That is, in the face of certain basic ontological conditions, plurality, freedom and contingency, humans experience anxiety, that in turn provokes ways of being (thoughtlessness, bad faith and misrecognition) that dull our discernment of the world and subdue the infinite demand to make sense of and respond to it.

In this sense, the modalities whereby we flee responsibility are not mere ethical aberrations that could be corrected through clever interventions. Insofar as they are grounded in our ontological and epistemological conditions, they are to some extent unavoidable features of being human. By admitting as much, Schiff (sensibly in my view) establishes hers as a necessarily modest project, one of suggesting techniques that may allow us, at least sometimes, to navigate our ontological conditions in a manner where we can remain alive and responsive to the onslaught of the impressions of the world and its demands upon us. The difficulty is heightened by Schiff's commitment to a structural understanding of agency that precludes an intervention that imagines a transcendent consciousness that would break through



thoughtlessness and take hold of responsibility. The glint of hope lies in the particular type of structuralism that Schiff adopts – one that is fluid and polysemic rather than determinant and self-reproducing. As she reminds us with Leonard Cohen, better the imperfect offering that lets the light get in.

An analysis of Schiff's discussion of her principal theorists lies beyond the scope of this review, so I limit myself to a few remarks. The chapter on thoughtlessness constitutes an original addition to the scholarship on Arendt's work on thinking and responsibility, suggesting an illuminating taxonomy of three inter-related forms of thoughtlessness – the failure of conscience, ideological thoughtlessness and everyday thoughtlessness. While highlighting the deleterious effects of these species of thoughtlessness, Schiff takes seriously the stickiness of ideological thought precisely insofar as it is 'buttressed by the conditions of everyday life' (p. 77). Schiff's response, both with and contra Arendt (and with Connolly) is to encourage a type of thinking and storytelling that neither abstracts nor harmonises but remains affectively present to the messy and unreconciled manifold of reality and thus might provoke us to better apprehend our imbrication in others' lives. My one quibble is that I believe Schiff incorrectly accuses Arendt of casting thoughtlessness as a drama played out entirely at the level of the subject without reference to the objective social conditions that facilitate or impede thinking. This accusation overlooks the broader analysis that we see principally in *On Totalitarianism* but also in *The Human Condition*. Indeed, one (in my view misplaced) criticism one could level at Schiff's book is that it insufficiently attention to the distinctive conditions of late modernity and advanced capitalism that normalise injustice and anaesthetize the subjects of the global north. This criticism would be misplaced because no single text can simultaneously conduct political, philosophical, sociological and economic analyses, and, in this regard, this book would be usefully brought into conversation with responses to the problem of political responsibility within other disciplines.

I found the choice of Sartre as an interlocutor slightly odd, not only because of his theory's subjectivism (which Schiff points out), but because the radical individualism of Sartre's understanding of agency seems difficult to square with the relational view that Schiff articulates as the underpinning of structural injustice. The move to Bourdieu, for whom even the most subjective experience is embedded in objective relations that structure practice, representation and understanding, is thus more satisfying. Schiff also usefully exploits Bourdieu's methodology of reflexive sociology, as that move whereby we integrate the insights of objective knowledge into our own role as persons who would reproduce or perhaps change practices, to elucidate her own.

The final two chapters move from the impediments to responsiveness to explore how the technologies and practices of narrative (both implicit and explicit) can be deployed to cultivate responsiveness. These chapters are likely to prove particularly useful for scholars seeking to integrate literary and political theory, not only because of the integration they perform but also because Schiff works through some of the



criticisms levelled at this enterprise and then articulates some of the tools political theorists might draw from literary theory. In the final chapter, she works with two novels – J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* – to illustrate the complex and often deceptive mimetic work of literary narratives in shaping a readers’ relationship with their own lives. Again, harking back to Arendt and Connolly, she avoids the temptation of the story that correctly narrates our implication in others’ suffering – preferring a narrative that keeps open the creative possibilities of the interpreter – that lays bear the ambiguity of the world and our responsibility to interpret it. The exposure of vulnerability – *pace* Butler – is a more powerful narrative than one that provides another explanation. That said, *Burdens of Responsibility* does both. It beautifully explains some of the key theoretical ideas that we might deploy in the work of cultivating responsibility *and* affectively engages the reader in a way that provokes her to wish to continue to think about the questions that remain (thankfully) unresolved.

Danielle Celermajer
University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia
danielle.celermajer@sydney.edu.au