

Thoughts on Collective Responsibility and Identity Politics

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Earlier we considered personal rights and obligations and their relationship. We noted that rights are derived from obligations, which means there are no rights without obligations. For example, I have an obligation not to kill you; it is for this reason that you have a right to life—that right is really nothing other than that obligation of mine. The limits of a person’s rights will correspond to the limits of the corresponding obligation; for example, if my obligation to keep my promise to visit you this Friday is limited, then your right that I keep my promise is also limited. And of course it is limited; for I need not keep my promise if I come down with the flu—and you certainly would not want me to keep it. Furthermore, should I fail in any obligation I have towards you, then essentially I violate your rights and I should be held “responsible” for that failure of responsibility.

But what about collective responsibility? Can a group or even a nation to which I belong be held responsible for the group or nation’s past actions, specifically past injustices? According to proponents of identity politics, the answer is a resounding affirmative. However, there are very specific conditions that must be met before we can ascribe collective responsibility to a group. I will argue that proponents of identity politics pay very little attention to these conditions and as a result ascribe collective responsibility to groups that are not collectively responsible.

Before attempting to bring some sort of clarity to this discussion, I would like to make a few fundamental points about identity and rights. Firstly, I do not have rights by virtue of my race or skin color, nor do you have obligations by virtue of your race or skin color. There are no “white” obligations in contradistinction to “black” obligations, nor heterosexual obligations in contradistinction to gay/lesbian obligations, etc. You and I have rights and responsibilities *by virtue of our shared humanity*. Sweep away that shared humanity with a postmodern broom and all we are left with is our individual identities, forever divided and forever struggling to prevail over one another. That, I believe, is the fundamental problem with identity politics today. There are simply no rights/responsibilities that are “white specific”, just as a person has no rights/responsibilities that are “gay specific”, “Hispanic or black specific”, etc. If there were, it seems that would imply that someone other, one who is outside the group identity, has specific obligations from which these rights are derived.

But this is precisely what adherents of identity politics seem to be asserting today, namely that those who have benefited from what is currently referred to as “white privilege” (whites) have very specific responsibilities that others who are not white do not necessarily have, regardless of the fact that many whites have known only poverty and hardship. It is this claim that I wish to test.

There is indeed such a thing as collective responsibility. There are, however, conditions for justified ascription of collective responsibility, and it is at this point that I can do no better than look to the principles articulated by political philosopher John Kekes, upon whom I will rely for the rest of this article.[1] My purpose is to carefully consider these conditions in order to test some of these claims.

The following are nine conditions that Kekes argues are required for the justified ascription of collective responsibility:

1. Agents are held morally responsible for actions, thus deserving of moral praise or blame.
2. The agents neither performed nor had control over the performance of the actions for which they are held responsible.

3. The actions were performed by other agents who belonged or belong to the same group as the agents who are held responsible.
4. The agents' moral responsibility for the actions of others derives from their joint membership in the same group.
5. The group to which the agents belong is moral.
6. The actions for which the agents are held responsible are part of the characteristic activities of the moral group.
7. The agents have identified with the moral group.
8. The agents' identification with the moral group is enduring.
9. If the agents had been in the place of the actual agent, they would have done what the actual agent did.

In terms of ascribing collective responsibility to white people for the injustices that black people have suffered in the past (i.e., slavery, systemic racism, racial profiling, etc.) and calling on white people to make individual reparations to black people (as Michael Eric Dyson does), the fifth condition is particularly relevant, namely that “the group to which the agents belong is moral”. This condition poses a problem for identity politics, because being white (Caucasian) does not constitute membership in a moral group—neither does being Hispanic, gay/lesbian, or female, etc. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, is a moral group, and so too is a nation like the United States of America, which is a political entity.

The sixth condition is also particularly relevant in the context of identity politics: “The actions for which the agents are held responsible are **part of the characteristic activities of the moral group**; for there are no characteristic activities of “white people” (Caucasian). It would be absurd to ask how “white” people act, whether they are religious, or virtuous, whether they are conservative or liberal, athletic or artistic, etc., nor are there characteristic activities of persons who are gay/lesbian—the latter can be religious and celibate, or religious and non-celibate, non-religious, married, promiscuous or monogamous, kind, unkind, bitter, resentful, or joyful and warm in their behavior towards others, etc. But there are characteristic activities of America considered as a single nation, and there are characteristic activities of the Catholic Church, as there are characteristic activities of the Klu Klux Klan, etc. If one were to ask what it means to be a member of the Catholic Church, one could say that being a Catholic involves going to Mass regularly, confession periodically, daily prayer, etc. Although the persecution and deliberate killing of “heretics” is part of the Church’s legacy, it is not a characteristic activity of the Church, for it is not part and parcel of what it means to be a faithful Catholic; in fact, it is inconsistent with what it means to be a follower of Christ. Most importantly, racism or the enslaving of one’s fellow man is not a characteristic activity of being white.

The seventh condition is also relevant for this discussion: “The agents have **identified with the moral group**”. Practicing Catholics and patriotic Americans identify with the moral group to which they belong, whereas fallen away Catholics, for example, may not; nor do those who have renounced their U.S. citizenship. However, “white” is not a morally homogenous group that one can choose to identify with—it is not even a moral group.

The final condition is especially relevant for this discussion: “If the agents had been in the place of the actual agent, they **would have done what the actual agent did.**” What this means is that if the present-day agents, such as the Pope and College of Cardinals, with the values, principles, dispositions and commitments which they currently possess, were in the place of the Catholic hierarchy of the High Middle Ages, they would have called for a crusade against the Muslims in Egypt and done as much evil against those in the city of Damietta, for example, as Innocent III, Cardinal Pelagius and the Crusaders did at the time. This is obviously not the case. If, however, current members of the Klu Klux Klan were in the place of the actual agent(s) who in

the late 19th century engaged in cross burnings and other acts of terror, would these engage in cross burnings and other acts of terror? Who would doubt it?

And so we can ask the question: is America collectively responsible for past injustices, such as the discrimination of blacks? In light of the conditions articulated above, Kekes convincingly argues that it is not; for the sixth condition is not met. He writes:

...it is certainly true that past discrimination had a direct influence on the welfare of its victims, but it is not true that discrimination has expressed the central values of American society. Discrimination against blacks and women has been widespread, but so has been oppositions to it. Such opposition has resulted, among other things, in the Civil War, the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and the Civil Rights Act, none of which would have been possible without extensive popular support. Moreover, the most powerful argument used by opponents of discrimination has always been that it violates the central values of American society as expressed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

...it is not true that discrimination has ever expressed central American values or that all or, most Americans have identified with the moral group whose members characteristically discriminated against blacks and women. To deny this does grave injustice to the memory of those countless Americans, mostly white males, who publicly condemned both discrimination and its practitioners; who, in their private lives, quietly, decently, and spontaneously treated blacks as women on their merits; and who brought about the political and moral changes that have made discrimination unacceptable.[2]

Identity politics involves, among other things, a categorical error; it confuses moral categories with categories that are entirely outside the moral domain. A nation is a moral agent as is an individual person, but "Caucasian" is not, nor is female, male, Hispanic, etc. To even feel one has to pay a black teenager double the price one would pay a white teenager for mowing one's lawn, in order to do one's part in making restitution for the sufferings of black people in the past, is to experience a false sense of responsibility. That certain proponents of identity politics have called for such things only shows how far some have drifted from Martin Luther King's dream that his four children "will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Notes

1. John Kekes. *Against Liberalism*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1997. 72-76.
2. Ibid., 84-85