

CRITIQUE AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

MALE RESPONSIBILITY AFTER #METOO



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ABSTRACT: *In light of the allegations of sexual misconduct and harassment made against Harvey Weinstein and other powerful men in recent months, this paper will examine how men might take on responsibility for themselves and a culture that enables these patterns of abuse. It will draw primarily on the work of Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Emmanuel Levinas to develop a model of responsibility that has three primary stages: taking ownership of past actions, critiquing gendered power relations, and learning how to foster relationships that are "intersubjective."*

#MeToo

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INTRODUCTION

On October 5, 2017, *The New York Times* published a story detailing allegations of sexual harassment and assault against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.¹ In the weeks since, many women have come forward to tell their stories of sexual misconduct by Weinstein and other powerful men in entertainment, journalism, academia, and politics. On social media, the hashtag “#MeToo” trended and became an opportunity for women (and some men and non-binary people) to acknowledge their experiences as victims of sexual harassment, assault, and misconduct.² Parallel to this, many men have been surprised by the magnitude and variety of stories and allegations. As a result, men have begun to view their past actions differently. The moment of being called out, individually or collectively, should be seen as an ethical opportunity—one that should be taken up by all men at this moment. However, claiming ownership of one’s past actions is not sufficient for responsibility. In this paper, I will draw on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, and Emmanuel Levinas to develop a model of responsibility that has three primary stages: taking ownership of past actions, critiquing gendered power relations, and learning how to foster relationships that are intersubjective. The discourse of this cultural moment, so far, has not moved past the first of these three stages, and I will attempt to outline a conceptual framework for how men in particular might take on responsibility.

BAD CONSCIENCE AND THE ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ACCUSATION

Friedrich Nietzsche dedicated a great deal of thought and writing to the role of systems of justice or punishment

1 Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>.

2 Accusations have been made by and against people of all genders, but I will focus primarily on misconduct by men against women.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 62.

4 Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 64.

5 Margaret Wentz, "How the Weinstein Era Will Change Us," *The Globe and Mail*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/how-the-weinstein-era-will-change-us/article37074263/>.

6 Nellie Bowles, "Men at Work Wonder if They Overstepped With Women, Too," *New York Times*, November 10, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/business/men-at-work-wonder-sexual-harassment.html?_r=0.

in the formation of what he calls "bad conscience." According to him, I do not see myself as responsible for my actions until I have been accused of causing harm or breaking a law. Punishment serves the function of "awakening the sense of guilt in the culprit."³ Once I have been accused, I begin to see my past actions as being mine and feel responsible for them. For Nietzsche, being constituted as a moral subject by punishment is largely restrictive. Punishment has the effect of increasing our fear and reigning in our desires; "in this way punishment tames man, but it does not make him 'better.'"⁴ Our desires are what drive our will to live, to eat, to reproduce, to feel pleasure, and so to restrict those desires is to restrict our very life-force. A legal system of criminal justice claims to punish on the basis of one's accountability, but Nietzsche argues that it *produces* an idea of accountability that is in fact a condemnation of life itself. In the absence of a punitive power, no sense of guilt or responsibility can exist. In her book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler disagrees with Nietzsche's cynical framing of this but takes from him an important insight: I only begin to think of myself in moral terms when something external makes me do so.

Since the start of #MeToo, many have expressed support for the women coming forward but are concerned that this moment might have unintended consequences in spaces shared by people of different genders. In *The Globe and Mail*, Margaret Wentz writes of her concern that in workplaces, "casual informality and warmth will be replaced by stiffness, anxiety and prudishness."⁵ An article published by *The New York Times* describes the paranoia and self-doubt many men are feeling, with one manager deciding to cancel his office's holiday party "until it has been figured out how men and women should interact."⁶ Both of these pieces view the morally anxious (male) subject disengaging, or opting out of relations with women out of fear of being accused of misconduct as a necessary consequence of this moment. We should take seriously the idea that bad conscience may not improve one's actions. I can feel incredibly guilty for my past actions but not allow that to redirect my future actions or encourage me to relate to others more ethically. Nevertheless, the mechanism of accusation can serve a crucial role in causing men to take on a type of responsibility that is more robust than just feeling guilty.

To be accused of something is to have the question raised that I may have done harm, and, in response, to be called on to give an account of what happened. Butler asks us to consider that such an ethical “failure” may well have an ethical valence or importance.⁷ Emmanuel Levinas gives us a model of how “bad conscience” can be a starting point for relating ethically to the other and expanding an idea of responsibility beyond guilt for my past actions. For him, it is not an explicit accusation about a particular act made within a system of punishment but rather my encounter with the face of the other that puts me into question. It is through the experience of being confronted with the face of the other that ethics emerge for Levinas: “that face facing me—in its mortality—summons me, demands me, requires me.”⁸ It is not just that I worry *someone* might be taking up the others’ space; I come to believe that *I* am in their space. Levinas emphasizes the ethical significance of my fear of causing harm to the other on the basis of my existence. This fear is not just self-loathing but a vital and important way in which we relate to the other. It inaugurates a relationship between myself and an other that is intersubjective. I have to give an account of myself and take on an infinite moral obligation to the other just because I am here and I see them. This is not just an abstract or immaterial claim; it reflects the profound lack of control we have in choosing our lives, our bodies, and the moment of history in which we find ourselves. I may not be causally responsible for the creation of my world, but this does not free me from responsibility.

In the case of men accused of sexual misconduct, it is clear why this accusation might be such an opportunity, especially if they did not at the time consider their actions to be wrong. But must this opportunity for ethics be restricted to only those who have assaulted or harassed others and been called out for it? Given the scope and publicness of recent accusations, this moment might serve to make *all* men feel responsible. Even if I am not accused specifically, the realization that so many men have done wrong might make me think about my own complicity as a man in a culture which enables this type of misconduct. In everyday life, we often come to regulate or reassess our actions not because *we* have been accused of wrongdoing but because we witness someone else being accused. Someone who does not tip servers at restaurants

7 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 21.

8 Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 24.

might come to re-evaluate their behaviour after seeing another customer berated for not tipping. Witnessing such an accusation may move me to alter my actions in order to protect myself, but it also may genuinely make me rethink how I act. In the case of recent accusations of sexual misconduct against other men, I might start to view my past actions in different terms. I might now see offhand jokes as sexist, recode unsuccessful advances as threatening, and view my numerous gendered micro-aggressions as being wrong and significant.

The type of responsibility I am advocating for is somewhat different from both the backwards-looking causal model of “bad conscience” and Levinas’ existential model. I may benefit and participate in modes of violence or injustice that I did not freely choose but that I am not innocent of. I think this is to some extent what Levinas is hinting at when he demands we all grapple with our “non-intentional participation in the history of humanity.”⁹ I did not choose to be born into a society which is organized patriarchally or built on stolen land, but here I am, and it is therefore “my business.”¹⁰ It is on the basis of more than just my actions that I understand myself as being responsible for the other. To see another man accused allows me to see how I am shaped as a man and how that shaping, though outside of my control, is still my responsibility.

9 Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 32.

10 Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 32.

11 Explicit and implicit beliefs about racial superiority are woefully unexplored in Levinas. While an emphasis on the alterity of the other offers ethical opportunities, any attempt to realize these opportunities must wrestle with Levinas’ bigotry and distinguish between oppressive and non-oppressive relations.

UNPACKING GENDERED ECONOMIES OF POWER

In order to take on responsibility, we must begin by transforming the way in which we relate to others. Given our sociality, we cannot make ourselves unrelated to others. Therefore, the burden is on us to make these relations ethical. One potential resource we have is, as Levinas describes, the power of the face of the other to make us recognize our responsibility. Despite the supposed self-evident importance of one’s encounter with the face of the other, people constantly violate and hurt others. Moreover, these violations are not randomly distributed; the type of face that appears to me as worthy of moral consideration may appear to me as such because of the way in which different types of people are valued differently.¹¹ It is part of my responsibility to understand

the ways in which different bodies and subjects are patterned and valued. In doing so, I might more robustly understand my obligation to others, “even if [they] seem marginal at first sight.”¹² To say that we live in a world in which power relations are patterned in favor of men is not simply to say that men are granted more power than women. It means that we are shaped as specifically gendered subjects and that we are involved in that shaping of ourselves, others, and the thoughts, actions, and identities of all. We are habituated according to different gendered economies of power that develop through history and are redefined and renegotiated constantly by everyone.¹³ The existence of different gendered economies helps to explain why so many men feel entitled to violate others and why it takes so long for stories of misconduct by people like Weinstein to be reported and taken seriously. It also gives a model for our complicity in the functioning of the system. We did not choose to be born into such gendered economies, and we cannot escape them, but we do have resources to push against norms, to direct our actions in different ways, and to “structure the possible field of actions of others” differently.¹⁴ Though critique may take as its aim something which seems external to me, if the thing being critiqued is involved in my constitution, critique is a challenge to myself.¹⁵ As Butler writes, “to call into question a regime of truth, where the regime of truth governs subjectification, is to call into question the truth of myself.”¹⁶ Consequently, the act of critiquing those economies and regimes gives us the possibility to take on responsibility for that which we did not choose.

DECENTERING THE INDIVIDUALIZED SUBJECT

Luce Irigaray critiques all of Western philosophy and culture for imagining the subject as individualized and singular. This singular subject is always imagined as masculine, even if cloaked in the language of gender neutrality. This kind of subject “can sustain himself only by bouncing back off some objectiveness.”¹⁷ If we imagine the subject as singular, he requires an earth upon which to stand, to ground his pursuit of knowledge, property, or power. This ground, Irigaray argues, has always been imagined as feminine. If women refuse to be the objects

12 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 23.

13 “Gendered economies of power” is similar to “libidinal economies,” in *Hélène Cixous’ “Extreme Fidelity,”* in *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. Susan Sellers. She claims these economies are determined not by “anatomical sex,” but by “history from which one never escapes.”

14 Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Essential Works of Foucault: Volume 3 (Power)* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 2000), 341.

15 Critique here means the explication of cultural assumptions and norms with an eye to resisting, redefining, and subverting them.

16 Butler, *Giving an Account*, 23.

17 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian G. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 133.
18 Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other*, 133.

19 Luce Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, trans. Kirsteen Anderson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 6.
20 Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, 15.
21 Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, 7.
22 Luce Irigaray, *I Love To You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1995), 46.

of male subjectivity, the subject itself cannot engage with the world, and “the erection of the subject might thereby be disconcerted and risk losing its elevation and penetration.”¹⁸ All relations of the singular subject to its world take this form, and, for this reason, women cannot imagine themselves as singular subjects without adopting a masculine model of grounding, penetration, and domination. Even if we try to imagine the singular subject as gender neutral, it will betray its phallogentrism by prioritizing oneness and grounding.

Any notion of responsibility that prioritizes oneness or individual accountability will give in to this tradition. That is why we must move past both the accused criminal Nietzsche describes and the existentially guilty *I* of Levinas. My responsibility is indeed *mine*, but I do not own it with exclusivity. Irigaray’s project is not to define a type of individual subjectivity that is distinctly feminine; rather, she wants us to think of human nature as “at least two, man and woman.”¹⁹ Due to their fundamental psychic investments in different gendered economies of power, men tend to privilege subject-object relations, like the kind mentioned above, and women tend to privilege intersubjectivity.²⁰ By shifting our focus to the latter, Irigaray hopes that meaningful relationships between men and women can be cultivated. As she writes, “renouncing the desire to possess the other, in order to recognize him as other, is perhaps the most useful and beautiful of the tasks which fall to us.”²¹ If the subject is not singular, he is not dependent on a repressed objective ground on which to stand. In Irigaray’s ideal model, “the relation between men and women is paradigmatic; it is the groundless ground of communication.”²² It is not enough to say that we ought to respect one another’s autonomy; we must recognize that we are mutually constituted. To imagine myself as an isolated subject is to do violence to the other in front of me.

Irigaray’s distinction between subject-object and intersubjective relations is crucial to understanding both the dominant culture that has brought us to this moment and the concept of responsibility we might derive from it. One might be tempted to think of the subject-object relation strictly in terms of sexuality—for example, pornography or street harassment. There are other modes of gendered subject-object relationality, such as

demanding unilateral emotional labour or seeking praise in service of one's ego. These are part of the overall story of men consistently, intentionally, and harmfully using a (feminine) other to ground their subjectivity. Those who have been accused of sexual misconduct have often been powerful men with illustrious careers and a great deal of ambition. If we understand these powerful men as individualized subjects, it becomes clear why they felt the need to render women their objects in pursuit of success and power. Thinking back to the concern that #MeToo will lead men to opt out of relating to women, we should ask what something like cancelling a holiday party might do. It hopefully would prevent a potential unwanted advance by a drunk manager to a younger female employee, but it would not change the mode of relationality that undergirds such an interaction. This may be an acceptable policy of harm reduction, but it does not address the underlying problem. Some commentators have suggested that men should adhere to the "Mike Pence Rule"—the policy of the vice president to not have dinner with any woman who is not his wife.²³ Yet if a man were to take up this policy, he is still the subject, and the hypothetical woman who would join him for dinner is still an object for his interest or one threatening his purity or the sanctity of his marriage. Opting out of that meeting does not grant that woman her own subjectivity nor does it allow for the crucial possibility that the two might recognize each other as different but both essential. In other words, subject-object relations can be overcome only by redefining those relations as intersubjective and not by retreat. By looking to a model of intersubjectivity as Irigaray and Levinas develop it, I can view the Other as necessary to my self-constitution, yet irreducible to their usefulness to me. Intersubjectivity allows us to appreciate the sociality of human life while preserving the difference of all the diversely gendered subjects in society.

CONCLUSION

Intersubjectivity ought not be reserved as a concept or model for only our most intimate personal relationships but should be fostered wherever possible. For Levinas, it is not primarily kin or close friends that we have infinite ethical obligations to but also strangers.²⁴ While our close interpersonal relations are a central site for ethicality, we

23 Nellie Bowles, "Men at Work," *New York Times*.

24 Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 97.

should not let that obscure our other obligations. The work of fostering intersubjective relations—of not trying to possess or extract value from the other—is difficult. This difficulty is amplified by the capitalistic framework in which many of our interpersonal interactions take place, but the intimacy of everyday sociality cannot be opted out of. Taking on responsibility for transforming relationships between genders must then begin in these everyday interactions. How might I navigate, for instance, an interaction with a server at a restaurant in a way that does not reduce them to an object to serve a function? How can I relate intimately to others and tell them about my problems without trying to make them a passive object that I am using to ground myself? These questions have no easy answers, but they require immediate attention. Responsibility is an ongoing project that requires constant and intense care and reflexivity.

The revelations of widespread sexual harassment and assault in the last few months of 2017 must be viewed as an opportunity for men to take on responsibility. Taking on this responsibility means viewing my past actions in the light of a culture of misogyny, harassment, and objectification. It also means recognizing that I am culpable for things of which I am not the sole, or even primary, cause. My constitution by forces and others outside of my control does not render me blameless or innocent. On the contrary, it is only by recognizing that I am not self-sufficient or contained that I can be responsible and resist the masculine notion of the individual subject. An important feature of this social context is the way in which men are habituated to relate to their world, and particularly to the women in it, in a subject-object mode. Men must take on responsibility for their actions and the world by working to make their relationships into intersubjective ones which recognize the difference in the other without trying to destroy or possess it.