Responsibility and Control

An Ethical Inquiry

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Commentaries are brief opinion pieces that are intended to introduce an idea or identify connections between works which beg for deeper investigation and analysis. Explicitly not an account of a research project or a comprehensive investigative endeavor, a Commentary in Confluence *is a snapshot, a single moment from the initial encounter with an idea or connection that suggests possibilities for interrogation toward new understanding. The Commentary is an appeal to think about an idea, to consider a question, and to take up in earnest the possible conversation toward which the Commentary points.*

Are we responsible for what we cannot control? The resurgence of antisemitism, racism, nativism, homophobia, and Islamophobia in the United States and around the world necessitates a revision to our understanding of responsibility and control — a complex effort with legal, existential, economic, political, and cultural ramifications. This inquiry requires analysis of the protean and debatable nature of individual control, the power of our social structures, and the connection between how we see the world and how we see ourselves.

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Throughout history, the I/Other construct has been rationalized, inconsistently internalized, and bastardized. In *Of Fear and Strangers: A History of Xenophobia*, George Makari makes a strong case for the history of xenophobia, its origins, implications, impact, and proposed explanations (and in some

cases, solutions) from a variety of scientific, philosophic, and political perspectives and thinkers over time. Some argue that stereotyping is nothing more than a biological response we form as infants once we begin to see the world, and especially our primary caretakers, as separate and different from us; however, in practical terms, biological response indeed differs from stereotyping. Whereas the former can exist as a result of the latter, the latter is deeply rooted in a variety of factors which may (or may not) include authoritarian familial upbringing, economic distress, and an interest to culturally preserve, as Makari suggests.

Skin color, ethnic origins, and (I would strongly argue) sexual orientation and gender identity are biological factors *outside* the confines of control. These human qualities simply *are*. Religion, behavior, and cultural leanings exist *within* the confines of one's control. Stereotypes aim at individuals and groups for associations both outside *and* within one's control. Freud contended that xenophobic behavior was driven not by the factors the recipient of such hatred could or could not control but rather by a deficiency within the aggressor's psyche. "Groups, Freud asserted, need somebody to hate…and such aliens [sic] were, comically enough, often hardly different from the beloved insiders" — an absurd notion Freud named "the narcissism of minor differences."[1]

Regarding the individual propensity to stereotype, Sander Gilman suggests in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* that "patterns of association are most commonly based, however, on a combination of real-life experience (as filtered through the models of perception) and the world of myth, and the two intertwine to form fabulous images, neither entirely of this world nor of the realm of myth."[2] Stereotyping, as the nucleus of hatred, feeds off a combination of a deficient psyche, individual experience, and worldly myth — forces which are all personal and phenomenological in nature and openly target associations both within and outside of individual control. The burden of hatred (from source through solution) has thus shifted in its entirety from recipient to aggressor. Further, not only does our hatred exist in our individual experience, but our thoughts, "truths," and the communication channels through which we choose to share and

[1] George Makari, *Of Fear and Strangers: A History of Xenophobia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 185.

[2] Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 21.

receive information emerge as reflections of ourselves and our personal contexts. In this sense, a singular reflection (of love or hatred) is both a window through which outsiders may gain further subtext and a warning that no single perspective is truthful for all. Freud would have been a harsh critic of the modern term "cancel culture." Edward Said suggests in his lecture *Freud and the Non-European* that Freud, founder of psychoanalysis and perennial student of literature, science, philosophy, and culture

> lends himself especially to rereading in different contexts, since his work is all about how life history offers itself by recollection, research, and reflection to endless structuring and restructuring, in both the individual and the collective sense. That we, different readers from different periods of history, with different cultural backgrounds, should continue to do this in our readings of Freud strikes me as nothing less than a vindication of his work's power to instigate new thought, as well as to illuminate situations that he himself might never have dreamed of.[3]

Although Freud was an observationist and the model of erudition, he insisted on careful and contextualized interpretations of literature and history itself. His metacognitive approach allowed him to find meaning in otherwise ill-favored opinions. By recognizing the lens through which content is produced, Freud instructs us to consider our sources, remain open to fresh interpretations, and avoid generalizations.

Michel Foucault had a slightly different take on this argument in his analysis of power. As Makari notes, Foucault "had long since moved away from such conscious intentions to show how power resided in quite rational discourses and their social structures."[4] This position challenges whether anyone can or should bear responsibility for beliefs or behavior if power is extracted from the social structures into which we are all born. Without reflection on the origin of xenophobia and a full and honest accounting of our individual conscious intentions (and their origins), the cycle of hatred is primed to continue. Gilman's position relates to one's

[3] Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2014), 27.
[4] Makari, 225.

intentions, the conscious mind, and reality: "Qualities assigned to the Other readily form patterns with little or no relationship to any external reality."[5] Although this general notion may be supported by Foucault, Makari, and Freud, Gilman's reference to "reality" is yet another subject for debate because the very nature of reality, with regard to fear and hatred, is both protean and illusory. As such, the qualities and patterns which Gilman references are inconsequential without connection to a permanent or fixed reality.

Are these patterns which form in our minds intentional or conscious? Are they neither? Or, is it possible that we intentionally and consciously yet *erroneously* create patterns which ease the need of our individual psyche for order and control? Evaluation of these psychological patterns requires analysis of the way in which and the reasons why we consume and disseminate information — factors on which our ability to collectively solve is predicated. The soundbites which fill our media, often published outside original context, offer no meaningful replacement for the "long-version" of any one story. If we intentionally allow our senses of awareness and truth to be formed by soundbites, all hope is lost in forming reasonable, defendable, and well-regarded solutions. The evolution of media has challenged our conscious decision-making instincts as we mindlessly scroll our feeds and further reinforce the algorithms designed to suggest more of the same. Reading a blurb from a GoFundMe page in support of the Yazidis is no substitute for reading Nadia Murad's memoir, *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State*. Paying a quick homage to Kristallnacht thanks to a reminder you saw on your news feed is no substitute for reading about the *Muselmanner* and Giorgio Bassani's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Celebrating MLK Day by briefly acknowledging who Martin Luther King Jr. was is no substitute for reading Sven Lindqvist's *Exterminate All the Brutes: One Man's Odyssey Into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of the European Genocide*. Discovering truths requires careful self-scrutinization of our intentional patterning and time; there are no substitutes for these efforts.

In consideration of the qualities and patterns which form the basis for stereotyping and xenophobia, we must revisit Sartre's

[5] Gilman, 21.

well-known position that "existence precedes essence."[6] The discrimination our world faces today reflects the complex relationships between history and modernity, individuality and community, accountability and control. Deeply rooted social structures, deficient psyches, and intentional patterning all offer support for the strength of essence over existence as the modern world into which we are all born does not guarantee full freedom and license to establish any essence we desire. Yet Sartre would purport that great freedom and great responsibility are intrinsically tied with our natural existence, *not* our essence. To realize both our freedom and our responsibility is to recognize those gifts in all others. That sense of responsibility is our collective essence and very much within our control.

[6] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism: from Dostoevsky to Sartre, Revised and Expanded*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1975), 349.