

# Taking Responsibility for Complicity in Moral Wrongs

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“our lives are increasingly complicated by regrettable things brought about through our associations with other people or with the social, economic, and political institutions in which we live our lives and make our living. Try as we might to live well, we find ourselves connected to harms and wrongs, albeit by relations that fall outside the paradigm of individual, intentional wrongdoing” –Christopher Kutz

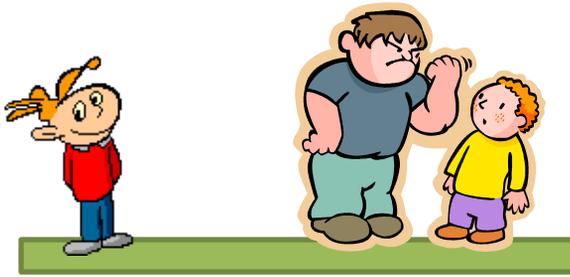
“many harms, wrongs, and injustices have no isolable perpetrator; they result from the participation of millions of people and institutions” –Iris Marion Young



“Concerns about complicity are *nuanced* concerns. [...] To be complicitous is to bear some improper relation *to the evil* of some practice or set of attitudes.” –Margaret Little

- What you **would do** as opposed to what you **should do**
  - What you *would do* might depend on what is convenient, self-serving, easiest
  - What you *should do* as a moral person is based on principles, values, virtues, weighing of good versus bad consequences
  - Ideally, what you *would do* and what you *should do* are the same!
- **Complicity**
  - When someone “endorses, promotes, or unduly benefits from norms and practices that are morally suspect” (Little 170)
    - Complicity might be *obvious* or *subtle*, might result from *intentionally* or *unintentionally* endorsing morally problematic behavior or norms
  - Ways to be complicit: inducing or commanding others to harm, counseling others to harm, consenting to harm, praising others who harm, failing to prevent a harm (Mellema 170–171)
  - It can be easier or more difficult to avoid complicity, depending on your privilege (being privileged = easiest difficult setting)
- **Examples** where you could be complicit in moral wrongs (depending on circumstances):
  - Witnessing bullying without reporting or intervening
  - Buying clothes manufactured by a sweatshop
  - Continuing vicious gossip
  - Working for a company that unfairly discriminates against others
- **Questions to ask :**
  - Am I aware of wrongdoing implied by my actions? Should I be aware?
  - How connected am I to the wrongdoing?
  - How much power do I have to fix the wrong?
  - Do I benefit from the wrongdoing? If so, what are my special obligations?





### DEBATE TOPIC

Case: Pat is really unpopular, and all of your friends spread cruel rumors about him on social networking sites and in school. You notice that Pat has become increasingly shy and anxious over the years. During gym one day, you see students using their phones to take embarrassing photos of Pat. The gym teacher notices but does not seem concerned. You don't think that anyone has physically attacked Pat.

Questions: Is anyone complicitous in the bullying against Pat? Should anything be done about it? If so, what? Who should take responsibility?

#### **Side A.**

I have never bullied Pat. Nothing I could do would make much of a difference. People would just find more subtle ways to bully Pat. I can't control other people's actions, and no one likes a tattler.

#### **Side B.**

Since I'm aware of the bullying against Pat, I should try to do something. If I don't try to help him, then I'm complicitous and not doing what I should. Maybe if I report or intervene, others will be less likely to bully in the future.

...other sides to the debate?



REFERENCES (several articles available on Dropbox--ask Nithin for access)

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Quote from page 1.

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