

Accountability— and the Risks Involved in Its Pursuit

George Wilson, S.J.



Accountability is in. The Catholic faithful call for accountability from bishops for their actions in the sex-abuse tragedy. Citizens call for accountability from CEOs and hedge-fund managers for their profits in the wake of economic meltdown for everyone else. Consumers call for accountability from oil companies with respect to prices, and from government inspectors with regard to the safety of our foods, bridges, and highways.

Accountability is one of the most sought-after values in our democratic society, closer to platinum than mere gold. It's associated with justice, that ideal state we forever seek and forever fall short of. No one would advocate its opposite, non-accountability: that the actions of people that harm others should be simply written off as "the way things are." Attention must be paid. Something must be done!

But though we bring accountability up so frequently, is what we are seeking all that clear? What do we mean when we say, "They should be held accountable"?

SOCIETAL ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES

We can begin with the structures of our society. As a (relatively) civilized society we have—laboriously, with much trial-and-error over decades and based on norms established over millennia—fashioned broadly accepted norms for determining the deeds for which we will hold people accountable. And we have worked out the processes by which we will determine the standards for measuring accountability in each instance, as well as the consequences of failure. Think of things like prison terms and statutes of limitations and all the complexities involved in the simple term "due process." It's interesting to note that the word accountability, though neutral in itself, is always used in connection with bad stuff: with failure and breakdown and malfeasance. We don't say, "We're holding you accountable for all the *good* you did in office." The ledger—the "account" behind the word—seems to be written only in red ink.

In both civil society and the church we have constitutions and statutes at various levels that attempt to define roles and expectations of office holders, including acceptable levels of discretion in their application. We attempt to define what will happen to those who fail in the responsibilities they have accepted. All these standards and procedures are humanly constructed and therefore fallible. (Other cultures have addressed the same issues and come up with quite different standards of accountability. In some cultures if you steal a spoon you may soon be missing a hand.) The norms can always be improved upon, and we must continually work at that improvement. Think of the death-penalty debate. At best our norms will only approximate the ever-receding vision of perfect justice, whether in their formulation or in their application to actual human situations.

THE HUMAN AGENTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

But societal norms and standards are only one aspect of accountability, even if they enjoy solid consensus. I have often marveled at the way leaders (or those aspiring to be leaders) will trot out the old bromide, usually with some huffiness: “*We are a nation of laws.*” It suggests that our systems of justice are never arbitrary, that the mere existence of laws guarantees justice. The adage is used to put down people who might argue that things are not so neat. The slogan is arguably one of the greatest sophistries ever foisted on the unthinking. To expose the deception involved is not really all that difficult. Have you ever heard of a law that was self-enacting? Or self-administering? No, the hard truth is that, no matter how well calibrated our efforts at determining norms for achieving justice, whether in civil society or in the church, their execution, or even the process by which the standards themselves are arrived at, always depends on human agents. On people, or to put it more bluntly, men and women much like me and thee.

And that fact opens a whole different set of questions.

PERSONAL PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

The societal pursuit of ever more adequate measures of justice, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is one thing. The dynamics by which *individual humans determine what will satisfy their own personal desire to see justice done* are something else. The answer to that

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question takes us inevitably (and in some instances, tragically) into the tangled world of the human psyche, where there lurk all sorts of spirits. Some benign, but others not so.

What outcome will satisfy a victim’s desire to “hold them accountable for what they did to me”? Or, for that matter, what does “held accountable” mean to an individual judge in the case; a jury member; a friend of the victim; an advocate on his or her behalf? Or anyone who feels personally affected by the outcome? The issue here is not some abstract societal norm but the satisfaction of a personal want, what we might call *psychological* justice, whether the “they” who inflicted the harm is a CEO, a government bureaucrat, a bishop, a spouse, a sister, a brother, or simply a garden-variety “neighbor.”

What calls for exploration and spiritual discernment is not justice as the *object* of our personal desires and attitudes but rather the spirits at work in shaping those desires. And the lengths we are willing to go to satisfy them.

The experience of being unjustly treated is ordinarily accompanied by feelings of anger. When victims perceive a serious violation of their personhood, those feelings may escalate to the level of rage. And of course such feelings may be quite appropriate, perfectly mirroring the severity of the violation. Readers of this journal will surely concur that no one should ever be blamed for the feelings they experience. They are the way a healthy psyche registers its initial response to events. But what we do in the face of our feelings is something else. It raises an entirely different issue than the creation and administration of societal prescriptions.

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I am frequently reminded of a couple who asked if I could help them with a serious conflict in their relationship. The wife discovered evidence that her husband had been having an affair with his secretary. (The genders of the parties are incidental and could have been reversed.) When the wife laid out the facts that supported her suspicions, the husband protested that he had not in fact been unfaithful. I then asked the husband whether his wife's conclusion was, if deniable, at least reasonable. Did the concrete details possibly lend themselves to such an interpretation? When the question was placed that way, the husband—a pleasant surprise—allowed that although he had in fact not been unfaithful the facts *could* lead a reasonable person to that conclusion. Her judgment was plausible.

In my innocence I sensed a hopeful breakthrough: the husband was genuinely forthcoming and prepared to apologize at least for giving the *appearance* that he had strayed. Maybe the conflict could be resolved amicably.

Alas, in my search for a harmonious resolution I had jumped too quickly. Upon hearing his openness to admitting, if not guilt at least indiscretion, his wife immediately blurted out, “Yes, but what about the way you took our money and went off to gamble it away in Vegas without telling me?” And we were off chasing another in what turned out to be an unending list of his failings. It took only a short time before it became quite clear that *nothing* he could say would satisfy her. In the face of each of his apparent efforts at apology she would pivot to another charge. She had him in a stranglehold and was not going to let him up for air.

The effort at healing was futile. She was already beyond the point of receiving repentance. Whether she ever actually acknowledged her true state and acted upon it by divorcing him (or else stayed married so she could pummel him endlessly in return for the pain of her suspicions), I never found out. But the experience helped me to formulate for myself a difficult question: *when does the appropriate search for justice—for “accountability”—become transformed into the zealot’s search for sheer revenge?*

AN INSATIABLE APPETITE?

Feelings of anger in the face of an experienced injustice are appropriate, as we have seen. Ideally—that

is to say, if the laudable goal of accountability is the only thing at stake—they would lead to actions that are precisely tailored to correspond to the failure of the perpetrator. No less but also no more. As Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Mikado* puts it (with tongue in cheek, to be sure):

My object all sublime
I will achieve in time
To let the punishment fit the crime,
The punishment fit the crime.

It all sounds very objective and impersonal. Just seeking justice, you know. This crime, this fitting punishment. But the following stanza reveals an attitude that is, if still comical, slightly more wicked:

To make each prisoner pent
Unwillingly represent
A source of innocent merriment,
Of innocent merriment.

It turns out that his delight consists not so much in the fact that impartial justice will be done as that the perpetrator will be personally ridiculed. It begins to sound rather like revenge: satisfaction of the original anger will come only from seeing the perpetrator suffer the same pain as the victim did. Words like “retaliation,” “retribution” or even “vendetta” are close at hand.

It turns out that anger, even when it is objectively warranted, can be spiritually dangerous. It is much like a rushing river, with an inherent tendency to expand beyond its legitimate course. A stream that began with clear protective banks picks up momentum from other, unrelated sources. It gains strength, and soon it becomes a torrent which knows no boundaries and destroys everything in its path.

In the case of serious personal violation it can require heroic character—and divine grace—to keep the desire for satisfaction from becoming a thirst for revenge. The message, though normally not spoken (or even acknowledged), becomes: “I’ve been hurt and my need won’t be satisfied until I see you suffer just as I did.” The criterion is no longer satisfaction of an impersonal balance, but rather the desire to see another suffer personally.

It is not easy to define exactly when the apostle of justice becomes an avenging angel. Doubtless the process takes different form for each individual, given their varying histories and contexts. But from experience we may extract some of the signs that the virtuous search for accountability has been corrupted.

First, the attention shifts from fulfillment of a defined societal norm to a focus on the perpetrator: not “crime shouldn’t pay” but rather “make him (or them) pay.” Another indicator, illustrated in the story of the couple above, would be the rejection of successive efforts at a reasonable resolution: the judge was biased; or the statute was outdated; or the procedure was faulty; or the judgment was delayed; or the accused was treated too leniently. The societal structures for achieving a satisfactory resolution—for accountability—are spurned. Fallible human efforts are not enough, only utopian perfection will do. And of course that will never be reached. The aggrieved victim then stands outside the boundaries of human community, unreachable and unfree, in the thrall of consuming passion.

One of the things that can be going on in the thirst for revenge was illustrated in the image of the flowing river. What was implied in the reference to those “other, unrelated sources”?

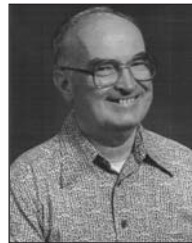
We are all products of our whole life-story. Without consciously intending to, we bring to the interpretation of each present event comparable experiences from our past, whether joyous or painful. The tragic implication is that it can be very difficult to contain our response to a present hurt. It is easily “contaminated” by the residue of other hurts from the past. The present then carries all the symbolic power of prior events that are really unconnected to it or even long “forgotten.” The practice of remaining totally in the present turns out to be a demanding discipline, if not a utopian ideal. The unresolved past claims its due even as its fingerprints are all but impossible to discern.

The story often reaches its sad conclusion when the victim becomes the victimizer. The apostle of social justice becomes the reincarnation of Genghis Khan. The next cycle begins. Thomas Merton used to quote Augustine to the effect that the weapon with which we would attempt to destroy the enemy would pass through our own heart to reach him.

Violence experienced becomes violence re-enacted. Perhaps not physical violence, but violence for all that. All too often we become that which we fight. You can’t wrestle a tar baby and remain pristine.

PROTECTION IN COMMUNAL VULNERABILITY

So where does all this leave us? For all its accompanying hazards, accountability remains a goal worthy of our best efforts. It is the isolated individual who is most at risk of succumbing to its in-built hazards. It seems that the best safeguard against its transformation into a consuming thirst for revenge lies in personal vulnerability within a supportive but challenging human community. We all need the foil of healthy exchange with people who can challenge our limited perspectives if we are to keep our legitimate passions focused on their proper object. Whether that takes the form of a spiritual director or counselor, a support group, or simply a friend or circle of friends who can call us to account, the underlying principle remains the same. The integrity of our search for accountability will be measured by the degree to which we can allow ourselves to be held accountable for our own behavior. Jesus reminded us that stones are always too available.



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