

Editorial

CONFLICTS WITHOUT & FEARS WITHIN: A PAULINE CALL TO RESPONSIBILITY IN TIMES OF POLARIZATION

MATHEW ATTUMKAL

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his 1762 philosophical work *Émile*, remarked that he would rather be ‘a person of paradoxes’ than ‘a person of prejudices’ (58). No doubt, the innate disposition of every human being is to transcend prejudices, even when confronted with opposing or incompatible ideas. Though this condition is quite common in the world we inhabit, few descriptions capture it more aptly than St Paul’s experience in Macedonia: ‘conflicts without and fears within’ (2 Corinthians 7:5). Martin Buber’s conception of *Begegnung*/encounter, in which the presence of the other becomes an occasion for genuine encounter and relational recognition, is difficult to sustain when difference is perceived primarily as a threat to one’s identity, convictions or security. In this context, St Paul’s ‘without and within’ experience provides a particularly illuminating paradigm for interpreting the contemporary human condition. Although formulated in a different historical setting, the Pauline insight remains pertinent: human existence continues to be influenced by the interaction between external conflict and internal fear. Conflicts appear in polarized political discourse, ideological and religious fundamentalisms, struggles over identity and belonging, and competing claims to truth. Fears, by contrast, are less visible but equally consequential. Conflicts and fears reinforce one another, producing defensive identities and weakening the capacity for responsible engagement with difference.

Human beings, by nature, are carriers of conflict and fear; consequently, pluralistic societies necessarily contain differences of conviction, interpretation, interest and value. Disagreement can be a sign of intellectual vitality and democratic maturity.

However, polarization begins when difference is transformed into an absolute division between *us* and *them*, when opponents become enemies, and when one's own community is regarded as the exclusive bearer of truth while the other is considered morally suspect or fundamentally illegitimate. The distance between disagreement and dehumanization can then become dangerously short. It is within this context that responsibility acquires its philosophical, ethical, religious and political significance as it needs to be placed beyond blame. Generally, responsibility is understood as accountability *for* an action, decision or consequence. Though it is essential, responsibility is also to be reinterpreted as being responsible *towards* others. It concerns the relational character of human existence and recognizes that our words, actions, silences, choices and omissions determine the modalities of the public sphere. However, polarization encourages a convenient distribution of blame: *they* are responsible for division; *they* have abandoned truth; *they* are intolerant; *they* are the problem, etc. Such reasoning relieves individuals and communities of the need for self-examination. The ethical challenge is therefore to recover the capacity for self-implication and to manifest moral maturity.

This requires attention to what may be called the crisis of the other; that is to say, a crisis in the relationship with the other. Individuals often disappear behind categories such as political opponent, religious fundamentalist, nationalist, liberal, conservative, progressive, traditionalist, secularist, believer or unbeliever. Once a person is reduced to a category, it becomes easier to dismiss, ridicule, silence or dehumanize that person. The recovery of responsibility therefore requires the recovery of encounter. Thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber, and Paul Ricoeur, in different ways, remind us that human existence is fundamentally relational and that the other is not merely an obstacle to freedom but a summons to responsibility. Dialogue does not begin with agreement; it begins with recognition of the humanity and dignity of the person with whom one disagrees. This does not entail relativism. One may oppose falsehood, resist injustice and defend deeply held convictions without denying the dignity of those who disagree. Responsible

pluralism thus sustains conviction without fanaticism, truth without arrogance, identity without exclusion and justice without vengeance.

Polarization also generates a crisis of truth. Information generally circulates within ideological ecosystems in which claims are accepted according to their usefulness to one's own group rather than their correspondence to reality. The decisive question becomes not “Is this true?” but “Does this support us?” Responsibility requires becoming answerable to reality. This obligation has acquired a special role in the digital age, where individuals can instantly become publishers, commentators and amplifiers. Falsehood can be widely circulated before correction becomes possible, while outrage often receives greater visibility than nuance. The ethics of responsibility therefore requires the capacity to pause before sharing, judging, reacting or allowing emotion to become moral judgement. Such restraint is not passivity but a form of moral courage. Conscience is crucial in this regard. In polarized environments, to question one's own side may be regarded as betrayal, while acknowledging truth in an opponent's position may be perceived as weakness. Yet conscience cannot be outsourced to the collective. The responsible intellectual, citizen, religious leader and scholar must remain answerable to truth even when truth becomes unpleasant or inconvenient.

Responsibility further requires a movement from reaction to response. Reaction is immediate; response is reflective. Reaction seeks an enemy; response seeks understanding. Reaction simplifies; response discerns. This does not mean avoiding confrontation. Responsibility may require protest, resistance, dissent and principled opposition. Yet responsible dissent refuses to allow the wrongdoing of others to determine the moral quality of one's own response. Injustice may be resisted without hatred, falsehood opposed without contempt, and conviction defended without dehumanization. The present issue of the *Journal of Dharma*, devoted to “Responsibility in Times of Polarization: Conscience, Dissent and Ethico-Political Imagination,” brings together philosophical, religious, ethical, literary, historical and socio-political perspectives on this challenge. The contributors

present responsibility not as an abstract moral ideal but as a contested and situated practice within concrete historical and cultural circumstances. The first article, “Forging Conscience for a Polarized Age: Wang Yangming’s Engagement with Zen Buddhism and His Ethico-Political Thought,” establishes a philosophical foundation for the volume by examining the formation of *liangzhi* or innate conscience, amid the intellectual dogmatism and political conflicts of the mid-Ming period. The second article, “Corporate Conscience and Ethical Imagination: *Pañcatantra* Wisdom in an Era of Corporate Polarization,” addresses the widening gap between corporate ethical rhetoric and organizational practice. Bringing Arendt’s account of thinking as resistance, Sen’s conception of public reasoning, Gandhi’s *Satyāgraha* and the practical wisdom of the *Pañcatantra* into conversation, it explores how *dharma* can contribute to the renewal of corporate conscience. The movement from institutional responsibility to historical responsibility broadens the question further, particularly by asking how societies remain accountable to contested memories. The article “Testimony as Responsibility in Times of Polarization: Oral History and Sino-Soviet Musical Exchange” examines oral histories of Chinese musicians trained in the Soviet Union as forms of ethical testimony.

The fourth article turns to literary representation to examine how moral judgement itself can be transformed. “*Eidos-Theos* in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*: Redemption, Reason and Responsibility” explores the tension between fixed moral categories and the transformation of ethical identity. This concern with the ethical transformation of perception further finds a different expression in the sphere of artistic practice. The article, “Conscience and Artistic Responsibility: Confucian Moral Aesthetics and Contemporary Chinese Art,” investigates art as a medium through which conscience can be cultivated and translated into social responsibility. The subsequent article, “From Spectacle to Responsibility: Digital Sport, Polarization and the Ethics of Mediated Belief,” examines the transformation of sport under digital media from physical spectacle into a mediated arena of meaning, identity, belief and collective belonging. The

article argues that spectatorship has consequently become an active process of identity formation and narrative construction, capable both of intensifying polarization and of opening spaces for dialogue.

The question of mediated belief leads, in turn, to the more explicitly political problem of how institutions regulate conscience itself. The article, “Sovereignty and Conscience: A Political Theology of Anti-Conversion Laws in India,” investigates the tension between individual religious conscience and state sovereignty in contemporary debates over religious conversion. Examining anti-conversion legislation through political theology, the article considers how legal categories such as “force” and “allurement” mediate questions of religious identity, ethical responsibility and belonging. Responsibility toward the other also requires responsibility toward the past, particularly when inherited traditions are remembered through simplified ideological categories. The article, “Conscience against Ideological Memory: Re-reading the ‘Three Obediences and Four Virtues’ in Han China through Ethico-Political Responsibility,” examines how inherited traditions can become distorted through polarized historical memory. The final article, “Ideological Narratives of Poverty and Prosperity: Marxism, Injustice and the Responsibility to Resist,” examines how ideological narratives shape the social interpretation and normalization of economic inequality.

All these contributions demonstrate that responsibility cannot be reduced either to individual accountability or to institutional obligation. It involves the formation of conscience, the interpretation of truth, the recognition of the other, the courage of dissent and the imaginative capacity to envision forms of common life beyond antagonism. The contributors also indicate that polarization is not merely a political phenomenon. It reaches into education, religion, culture, intellectual life, social relations and the structures through which communities determine whose voices are heard and whose experiences remain invisible. Hence conflicts without and fears within should lead to a responsible coexistence among people and attentiveness to dissenting voices.

Moreover, the alternative to polarization is not uniformity.

A society in which everyone thinks alike would neither be possible nor desirable. The task is rather to cultivate a responsible pluralism in which differences can be maintained without becoming mutually destructive. Such pluralism requires intellectual humility, moral courage, epistemic responsibility, dialogical openness, and solidarity with those who are vulnerable to exclusion. It also requires attention to structures and institutions. Responsibility must therefore remain both personal and structural without allowing structural explanations to dissolve individual agency. The Pauline image of ‘without and within’ finally offers not a counsel of despair but a signpost to courageous hope. Conflict is real, and fear is powerful, but neither must have the final word. The future remains dominated by human choices, particularly by the truths we defend, the narratives we circulate, the relationships we cultivate and the injustices we refuse to ignore.

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