

“Complicity”  
Extended Dissertation Abstract  
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What does it mean to be complicit in diffused collective wrongs like structural racism, gender-based oppression, or climate injustice, and what responsibilities are entailed by complicity? Moral philosophers have often understood complicity to consist in some degree of inherited culpability, arising from knowing contributions to wrongs primarily inflicted by others (Gardner 2004 and 2007; Lepora and Goodin 2013; Mellema 2016). Others trace complicity to individuals’ intentions to join in collective activity (Kutz 2000; Isaacs 2011). But these theories are too restrictive to explain the variety of contexts in which we identify and hold individuals responsible for complicity, including in ways that do not assume blameworthiness. In ordinary life, as well as across political and feminist philosophy and interdisciplinary scholarship, we sometimes ascribe complicity to individuals for participation in diffused wrongs neither intended nor controlled, and hold ourselves and others responsible for the blamelessly ignorant reenactment of wrongful practices. Applying methods from feminist moral epistemology, I ask what we can learn about complicity by taking these literatures and interpretive practices seriously, and what theory of complicity might better explain and support our practices of responsibility in a variety of collective contexts.

My dissertation offers a novel reconceptualization of complicity as participation in collectively perpetrated wrongs, including structural injustice. A broad view of participation, I show, can account for a variety of behaviors from the most obviously causal to subtler ways of reinforcing harmful systems (sometimes by inaction) and insulating them from criticism. Citing feminist ethics and political philosophy, literature on ignorance, and new research on collective action, I show that participation – and not knowledge or intention – is both necessary and sufficient for complicity. I maintain, further, that we need not divide the moral spectrum of complicity into interpersonal and structural contexts (contra Aragon and Jaggard 2018). Tracing complicity to participation can do broad service to this moral domain, and helps us reckon with the normative significance of even unknowing and unintentional participation in harmful systems.

I also argue that complicity does *not* entail blameworthiness. There are many meaningful cases of non-culpable complicity – that is, cases in which we have good reasons for understanding agents as complicit, but not blameworthy – not just in structural injustice, but across a variety of collective wrongs. Because we find non-culpable complicity across contexts, and because these cases are not just rare exceptions, I conclude that complicity does not entail culpability. However, this conclusion gives rise to the worry that to extricate complicity from culpability is to render it morally meaningless. I draw on a range of different views of moral responsibility to show that this concern rests on a common, but mistaken, assumption about responsibility, namely, that moral responsibility entails blameworthiness. But moral responsibility for wrongs, and culpability for wrongs, are not equivalent. Drawing on scholarship by Bernard Williams (1981; 1985), Miranda Fricker (2016), Margaret Urban Walker (2006; 2007), Iris Marion Young (2011), Claudia Card (2010), and others, I demonstrate that the bad acts for which we may be responsible are not exhausted by those for which we should be blamed, and that many *practices of responsibility* can be warranted even where blame is not (e.g. mitigated criticism, first-personal shame, mutual education, (re)establishing truths, resistant action). While existing theories of complicity frame responsibility as a binary – either culpable or “off-the-hook” – my framework supports a wider repertoire of ethical and political responses. It directs us to ask more practical questions about our responsibilities, how to discharge them, and how to hold each other accountable.