2004

Moral Psychology: Feminist Ethics and Social Theory

Peggy DesAutels
University of Dayton, pdesautels1@udayton.edu

Margaret Urban Walker
Arizona State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub

Part of the History of Philosophy Commons, and the Other Philosophy Commons

eCommons Citation
http://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/75

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.
Most of us view ourselves as having moral commitments and expect that when given the opportunity, we will follow through on these commitments. But our moral expectations may have little to do with how we actually behave. I explore in this chapter some explanations for our failures to follow through and some possible solutions to bridge the gap between our moral commitments and our behaviors. I draw on recent empirical studies and argue that social contextual cues and mindless mental habits play significant roles in inhibiting real-time moral responsiveness. I conclude by identifying mindful ways to recognize and resist such obstacles.

THE PROBLEM

There are many reasons why our day-to-day moral lives may fail to reflect our moral commitments. We may have selfish moments, we may quite consciously choose to override our moral commitments when we have other priorities, or we may attempt to follow through on our moral commitments but be incompetent at doing so. I am most interested, however, in situations where our moral commitments apply, we do not simply choose to ignore or override these commitments, we are competent, and yet we still fail to follow through. Such situations often involve subtle social influences or unrecorded psychological habits that prevent us from acting in ways that coincide with our own moral stands.

Ethical theorists and even moral psychologists have tended to be uninterested in theorizing the conditions under which we do or do not follow through on moral commitments or in theorizing how best to apply abstract
ethical theories to concrete and particular lives. The assumption seems to be that if we have committed to a particular moral theory, we will, when possible, live our lives in accordance with that commitment. On those occasions when ethicists do offer examples of applications, the situations to which their theories are applied are usually hypothetical and described in a paragraph or less. Immanuel Kant, for example, offers four paragraph-length descriptions of scenarios to which the categorical imperative can be applied (1996b, 30–32). More recently, Lawrence Kohlberg (1984), the Harvard psychologist who developed a Kantian-based theory of moral development, studied the moral reasoning of young boys using the “Heinz dilemma”—a paragraph describing a married man who must choose between stealing a life-saving drug and letting his wife die. But both Kohlberg and Kant leave us wondering whether it is possible to commit to and successfully follow through on a Kantian ethic in our actual day-to-day lives. For example, would the boys who reasoned through to a particular solution to the Heinz dilemma have noticed if and when they were faced with a similar dilemma in their actual lives? And if they had recognized the dilemma, would they have actually acted in the way that they hypothesized they would have acted? Being able to reason morally about a paragraph of text may have nothing to do with how we perceive, reason about, and act in response to the concrete situations we face in our day-to-day lives.

In my own classes, when I ask students to reason about the Heinz dilemma and to describe what they would do if they were in a similar situation, many of them conclude that they would steal the drug. I then point out to them, however, that almost no one actually resorts to stealing when they or their loved ones are denied life-saving treatments. I also suggest that when push comes to shove, they probably would not themselves resort to stealing. There would, in all likelihood, remain too many social circumstances and habits of thought and behavior that would prevent them from doing so.

One group of ethical theorists, comprised of those who address moral internalism, does address whether or not holding moral beliefs or making moral judgments is necessarily accompanied by the motivation to act on those beliefs and judgments. But most of this work on internalism is conceptual rather than empirical. Even those moral internalists who have an empirical bent concern themselves primarily with whether or not having a moral belief is correlated psychologically with having the motivation to act on that belief. They do not address psychological and social conditions under which those who are motivated to act may still fail to follow through.

Although few ethical theorists focus on how best to go about living our day-to-day lives so that they reflect our moral commitments, some feminists have attempted to move past short simplified descriptions of hypothetical situations to better determine how both men and women actually reason about
and respond to concrete moral situations. Carol Gilligan (1982) followed Kohlberg’s example in her early research on developmental moral psychology, and compared the reasoning of young boys to young girls using short descriptions of hypothetical dilemmas, but in later studies she interviewed her subjects (both male and female) concerning examples of moral dilemmas they had faced or were currently facing in their own lives. This was certainly a step forward, but Gilligan’s approach still tells us very little about the real-time processes subjects use when faced with a dilemma. How we reconstruct past situations or describe current situations in an interview setting is often quite different from how we actually describe, reason, and behave in real time. Our motivations and behaviors are seldom totally transparent to us, and we are prone to fabricating “reasons” and “explanations” for our actions so that we will appear more “rational” or “moral” to ourselves and others than we actually are. More importantly, however, such interview-based approaches tell us nothing about moral attentiveness or missed moral opportunities. If we tend to be oblivious to moral demands or subtly influenced by social contexts to ignore the needs of another, studies like those of Gilligan will fail to bring such moral failures to light. I maintain, then, that moral responsiveness can only be assessed by examining relevant actual, real-time practices.

Margaret Urban Walker makes a related point. In her book Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics (1998), she advocates moving past abstract, abbreviated theories of morality and moral behavior. Walker presses for a view of morality “as something existing, however imperfectly, in real human social spaces in real time, not something ideal or noumenal in character” (18). Walker focuses her concerns on moral habits and practices and points out that what we notice about our own moral practices may be quite different from what is actually occurring. One of our main moral tasks, then, is making our previously unattended-to moral practices and habits more transparent. She argues that what we need but do not yet have is “an empirically saturated reflective analysis of what is going on in actual moral orders” (11). 

Walker and Gilligan, along with many other feminists, have enriched our understanding of morality by emphasizing the socially embedded nature of our moral identities, judgments, and practices; the need for examining critically actual moral behaviors and practices as they occur in richly detailed concrete situations; and a call for transparency of our gendered understandings, social practices, and power-based relations. I hope to build on these insights by delving more deeply into just a few of the practices and habits that mold our day-to-day moral behaviors.

As a start, let us assume that we as moral agents have made specific moral commitments in our lives and intend to follow through on them. For example, let us assume that we generally agree with and are even inspired to live
our lives (as I do and am) by Joan Tronto's (1993) account of an ethic of care. Tronto's ethic recognizes the importance of moral responsiveness. "To be a morally good person requires, among other things, that a person strives to meet the demands of caring that present themselves in his or her life". (126). According to Tronto, there are four key elements of care. They are "caring about, noticing the need to care in the first place; taking care of, assuming responsibility for care; care-giving, the actual work of care that needs to be done; and care-receiving, the response of that which is cared for to the care" (126, emphasis added). I focus here primarily on the first element: "caring about" or the moral requirement to notice the need to care in the first place.

Assuming that I have, indeed, committed to being attentive, what can I do to ensure that I am as attentive as possible? Tronto never fully theorizes how best to be attentive; she simply suggests the importance of passivity—of an "emptying the mind" or a suspension of "one's own goals, ambitions, plans of life, and concerns"—as a way of being receptive to the needs of those around us (1993, 128). Tronto does not elaborate on what she means by passivity, but there is good evidence that moral attentiveness is not best achieved through an unreflective passivity or mental emptiness. Passivity allows for a susceptibility to the potentially biasing influence of others and to critically unreflective habits of thought. I argue that moral attentiveness requires a certain nonpassive vigilance of thought where we attempt to counter known psychological tendencies and subtle social influences that prevent us from seeing and responding to the demands of care. Even more importantly, moral attentiveness requires active structuring of our social environments, habits, and practices in ways that facilitate seeing and responding to the moral features to which we are committed.

In what follows, I examine some of the mental processes and behavioral practices that contribute to the inhibition of moral responsiveness. I focus on three, sometimes overlapping, factors that contribute to unintentional moral unresponsiveness. I first address how our particular mind-sets could result in our being oblivious to the fact that a response is called for and briefly survey some of the mind-sets that could result in moral oblivion. I then examine how situational ambiguity could result in a sort of moral immobility and detail some of the ways that situational ambiguity and subtle social factors influence our real-time moral responsiveness. I conclude my discussion of inhibitors to moral responsiveness by addressing how situational and social pressures could influence us to ignore even unambiguous moral demands. The chapter ends with a sketch of possible strategies for resisting mindless mental habits and morally immobilizing social cues that lead to moral unresponsiveness. I illustrate throughout that becoming a feminist who responds to real-time moral demands is, indeed, no simple task.
MORAL OBLIVION

One obvious cause of moral unresponsiveness could be termed "moral oblivion." To be morally oblivious is to be completely or mostly unaware of a moral demand being made. We could be busily focused on a very specific nonmoral task and fail to notice what is going on around us. We could be lost in our own world with our thoughts inwardly focused. We could be following a well-established routine or pattern of mental behavior and fail to notice new input that does not fit the routine or pattern. The list is endless. But the point here is that our minds are inescapably engaged in a variety of ways throughout the day. Even when we have committed ourselves to noticing and responding to very specific types of moral demands, the solution cannot be to "empty our minds" simply because our lives require mental activity and attention. We would like to think that our everyday perceptions are more objective and open-minded than they actually are. But the fact of the matter is that what we notice and what we respond to in our lives varies tremendously depending on our mental orientation and the context that induces this orientation. One result is that we are sometimes oblivious to the moral demands of others even though we do not intend to be and even though in different mental and contextual circumstances we would not be. In this section, I highlight just a few of the contributing factors to moral oblivion: mindless routines, goal-directed foci, contextual cues, conceptual rigidity, and emotional filters.

One contributor to moral oblivion is our engagement in mindless routines. Much of what we do is repetitive and automatic. As a result, we do not notice much of what is happening unless there is a problem. Ellen J. Langer, a social psychologist, notes that "a familiar structure or rhythm helps lead to mental laziness, acting as a signal that there is no need to pay attention" (1989, 35). Mindless routines are likely to be found in family and work-based contexts and are likely to take up large portions (if not all) of our days. For instance, we could develop unnoticed habits of interaction with family members in the context of our particular family's daily routines that prevent us from noticing many of their emotional and moral needs. As a result, even the moral demands of those we love most may remain unnoticed and unattended to. In the workplace, patterns of sexual harassment may be so habitual that the harassers and perhaps even those being harassed may end up in mindlessly perpetuating the behavioral patterns and remaining oblivious to the harms.

Focusing on a goal-directed task has a similar effect. If we are busily attempting to solve a problem or reach a goal, features in our environment of relevance to the goal or problem are most salient to us and remaining features are "backgrounded." As a result, we are likely to miss morally relevant
environmental cues. This becomes even more likely when we are time constrained. For example, if I am late for a meeting, I may hurriedly pass by someone who needs help without even taking in that such help is needed. A “Good Samaritan” study of theological students by J. M. Darley and C. D. Batson (1973) showed that when subjects were in a hurry and passed by a man lying in a doorway asking for help, only 10 percent of them stopped to offer help. Whereas when the subjects were not in a hurry, 63 percent stopped. Although the study did not examine in detail the mental states of those who passed by, it may well be their hurried state contributed to a type of oblivion to the moral demand being made on them. It should be no surprise that when we are busy or stressed for time, we are more oblivious to moral features in our environment.

Particular contexts also contribute to moral oblivion because contexts cue expected behaviors and responses. As Langer points out, “we whisper in hospitals and become anxious in police stations, sad in cemeteries, docile in schools, and jovial at parties” (1989, 35). Although she does not directly address the moral implications of context-cued behaviors, such behavioral expectations do indeed have significant moral impact. If we are in a context where we expect to experience certain types of behaviors (and do not expect to experience certain other types of behaviors) both in ourselves and others, we may completely miss morally relevant aspects of situations in those contexts. If we are in a work setting, for example, we are not expecting to see or respond to the personal suffering of colleagues and thus may fail to notice the clear signs. Or if we are happily joking around at a party, we may fail to notice the sexist implications of a joke just told or that someone’s feelings have been deeply hurt.

Conceptual and categorical rigidity also contribute to episodes of moral oblivion by restricting either how we categorize a particular element within a situation or how we organize an entire perspective on a situation. Such perceptual rigidity will often result in a failure to see that “nonmoral” features could be recategorized in morally relevant ways or that a situation could be seen from an entirely different moral perspective. As a simple example, we can lock “pets” into one category, “livestock” into another, and “meat” into yet another. Such rigid mind-sets allow us to remain oblivious to the moral implications of eating meat—even when we are committed to being morally responsive to the suffering of animals. An especially pernicious perceptual inflexibility comes out of the deep prejudices and the harmful stereotypes that we hold. Feminists have long been aware that stereotypes associated with race, class, and gender can be so entrenched that we may be oblivious to the needs of (and may even harm) many with whom we interact on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, we can be and often are morally oblivious as a result of certain emotional states. It is difficult to see moral features in our environment when these
features are filtered by certain emotional states and disorders. We filter aspects of our experience when we are angry, deeply depressed, anxious, elated, bored, and so on. Luc Faucher and Christine Tappolet (2002), for example, point to psychological research showing how fear results in “attentional biases.” They suggest that “the emotion of fear, as experienced by normal subjects, involves an attentional bias towards threat stimuli” (12). Clearly, if being in certain emotional states biases us toward certain stimuli, these states could well cause us to remain oblivious to other stimuli—stimuli that may be relevant to our moral commitments. Thus, our emotional states are just one more potential cause for our being morally oblivious and thus unresponsive.3

It is important to mention that not all oblivious states involve a complete lack of awareness—there can be degrees of oblivion. For example, we can be morally oblivious even when we are somewhat aware of a morally relevant feature but fail fully to attend to that feature. It is almost as if a feature of our environment remains solely in our moral peripheral vision and never enters our morally focused gaze. A good example of moral oblivion resulting from noticing and yet failing fully to attend to a morally relevant feature was described to me by a friend of mine. He was waiting to cross at a crowded city intersection thinking his own thoughts and only vaguely noticed an elderly woman tottering unevenly toward the same intersection. Although he considers himself to be the type of person who helps those in need, he did not fully attend to the fact that this particular woman needed assistance at this particular intersection. It was only when someone else offered assistance that he mentally kicked himself—of course she needed assistance, and he should have offered it! Awareness of sexual harassment can also come in degrees. For example, a female employee may be somewhat aware that she is uncomfortable by certain behaviors of her male colleagues and even be somewhat aware that other female employees are similarly uncomfortable, but she may never fully attend to her own and others’ discomfort and thus may never directly respond even when in a position to do so.4

So, we can have moral commitments, we can even be committed to being morally responsive in our day-to-day lives, but we can fail to follow through on our commitments simply because we remain morally oblivious to our own and others’ needs—because our minds are otherwise organized and engaged. One way to avoid moral oblivion is to resist habituated, mindless patterns of thought and behavior—to live more flexibly and “mindfully” both as individuals and as groups of individuals.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE

In some situations where we unintentionally fail to follow through, it is not that we are simply oblivious. Instead, we are aware that a situation might call
for a moral response from us, but we are unsure, and in the end we do not respond. Because we are social creatures, we can easily be swayed, often unconsciously, by those around us to resolve our uncertainty in a way that counters our ostensible moral commitments. A number of significant studies in social psychology help me to make this point and are nicely summarized in Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbitt’s *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (1991).

There are three especially salient ways that our moral responsiveness could be influenced by social context. Imagine that we are in a group situation where the group witnesses a woman being harmed. We are capable of coming to her aid, but we do not. One possibility for our inaction could be that we assume that someone else in the crowd will respond. We take no responsibility for responding, even though we fully recognize that somebody should respond. A very different possibility for why we fail to respond could be that the situation is ambiguous (e.g., it is at least somewhat unclear to us that a woman is actually being hurt), so we subconsciously rely on others to interpret the situation for us. Because no one else responds, we assume that we have misread the situation and there is no need for anyone to respond. And a third possibility is that we correctly interpret what is happening (e.g., that a woman is being severely beaten and needs immediate help), but we do not act because we feel social pressure to conform outwardly to the interpretations, attitudes, and inactions of those around us. I expand on each of these possibilities below.

One of the more significant social influences of relevance to moral follow-through is referred to by social psychologists as “inhibition of bystander intervention.” Most of us have probably heard of at least some of the studies that show that the presence of others tends to dilute or diffuse the responsibility felt by potential altruists. In the 1960s, John Darley and Bibb Latané, both situational psychologists, noticed and theorized about a series of attacks on women in which no one responded to the victims’ evident distress. Perhaps the most famous (or should I say “infamous?”) bystander inaction case involved Kitty Genovese:

Over a 30-minute period in Kew Gardens, a middle-class section of Queens, New York, a woman named Kitty Genovese was stabbed repeatedly by an assailant. Though she shouted for help continually during that time, and despite the fact (as police later were able to establish) that at least 38 people heard her and were aware of the incident, no one intervened in any way. No one even called the police! (Ross and Nisbett 1991, 41)

Although media commentary at the time tended to attribute the inaction of onlookers to an ever-increasing alienation and indifference of inhabitants of large cities, Darley and Latané concluded from their own studies that situational factors are much more significant than the supposed worsening character traits of city dwellers.
In one study conducted by Latané and Darley at Columbia University, students in various configurations were asked to complete questionnaires in a room that slowly filled up with smoke. The subjects were either by themselves, with two other naive subjects, or with two confederates who had been instructed to ignore the smoke. Seventy-five percent of the students who were left alone intervened by exiting the room to report the smoke; only 38 percent of those who were with two other naive students intervened; and only 10 percent of those working alongside the two impassive confederates left to intervene (Ross and Nisbett 1991, 41).

In another study by Latané and Rodin, while subjects were filling out a questionnaire, they could hear what sounded like the female experimenter taking a bad spill on the other side of a room divider. Subjects were either alone, with two other naive subjects, or with one unperturbed confederate. The results were strikingly similar to the study just described. Seventy percent of solitary subjects intervened, whereas only 40 percent of those sitting with other naive subjects intervened, and only 7 percent of those with impassive confederates got up to offer assistance (Ross and Nisbett 1991, 42).

These two studies, and others like them, suggest that those around us have a significant impact on how we interpret and respond to ambiguous situations. Even when we are committed to alleviating the suffering of those we encounter, we may still fail to do so. We don’t intend to be unresponsive, but we fail to respond, nonetheless, either because responsibility is diffused or because we are socially influenced to reperceive the situation.

One aspect of the two studies just described is that the situations were somewhat ambiguous; it wasn’t necessarily clear to the subjects in the study exactly what was going on. Perhaps the smoke was harmless, or perhaps the woman behind the partition was fine. When situations are at least somewhat ambiguous, it may be that we have more of a tendency to ignore our initial reaction and to rely solely on social context. But studies conducted by Solomon Asch in the 1950s show even more convincingly, I think, how susceptible we all are to social context even in unambiguous situations. Asch’s work demonstrates that reports of even our most direct visual perceptions can be socially influenced.

In one of Asch’s studies, a naive subject was placed in a room with six to eight confederates. Over a sequence of trials, the subject was asked to compare a “standard” line with three “comparison” lines and then say which comparison line was the same length as the standard line. In each trial, the confederates were asked in turn to supply their answer. Finally, the naive subject who had been instructed to consult with no one, answered last. During the first few trials, the subjects found the task easy, as all of the confederates supplied the obviously correct answer prior to the subjects’ being asked to report their judgments. On the fourth trial, however, all of the confederates confidently, and with no hesitation, supplied the same obviously
wrong answer—judging that the 0.5 inch comparison line was the same length as the 1.5 inch standard line.

Ross and Nisbett describe what would usually happen when the first confederate voiced a wrong answer, "Inevitably, the subject’s reaction was one of wide-eyed disbelief, a quick double check to make certain that the judge’s response was as off-base as it seemed, and often a nervous giggle or some other expression of vicarious discomfort at his peer’s folly" (1991, 30). As more confederates followed suit, however, the subject’s "feelings of disbelief and discomfort . . . were . . . greatly heightened and [took] on a different quality" (30). When it was finally the subjects’ turn to answer, they were in effect asked either to conform to the unanimous, apparently certain, majority or to remain independent and stick to the convictions of their own perceptions. Each subject participated in five to twelve conformity trials embedded within ten to eighteen trials total. Even Asch, who expected there would be few who conformed, was taken by surprise. Depending on the particular study, 50 percent to 80 percent of the subjects conformed to the majority’s judgment at least once. Overall, the subjects conformed a third of the time (30–31).

Certainly, one could be heartened by the fact that two-thirds of the time, conformity did not occur. But it is also very telling how many conformed even in situations containing very unambiguous visual evidence. It is also noteworthy that Asch himself did not take the stance that the conforming subjects reperceived or reinterpreted the visual data. Rather, he concluded that either conformers assumed that their private perceptions must somehow be wrong or they assumed that their private perceptions were in fact correct but were unwilling to dissent from the majority.

What then do these various studies contribute to our understanding of moral responsiveness? They certainly point to ways that our responsiveness or unresponsiveness can be influenced by those around us and that we can often be unaware of the role such social influence plays. These are not examples of overt coercion by others. In fact, in nonexperimental situations involving bystanders, for example, those around us do not intend to influence even subtly our judgments and behaviors. And yet we are being influenced often profoundly and in a number of possible ways. The only way to counter such influence would, at the very least, involve a mindful awareness of these types of social phenomena.

MORAL MINDFULNESS

Unintended failures to follow through on our moral commitments are not rare occurrences. Many, if not most, of our real-time perceptions of situations that call for a moral response are indeed biased by our current mind-sets and
our social situatedness. We can be morally biased or oblivious when we are mindlessly engaged in routines, stuck in categories, oriented toward single perspectives, or influenced by social contexts. When at the workplace, we are influenced by work-related mind-sets and our colleagues. When at social gatherings, we are influenced by party-related mind-sets and our fellow partiers. When at home, we are influenced by home-related mind-sets and our loved ones. And, when confronted by the needs of strangers, we are influenced by those around us confronted by those same strangers. In fact, we are almost never passively "open-minded" and "alone" in our judgments or in our responsiveness.

Because we tend to underestimate how prone we are to mindless habits and social influences, we tend to overestimate that we will, in fact, interpret and respond to situations in ways that best follow through on our moral commitment to care. More work certainly needs to be done on how best to overcome such biases, but certainly the first step must be to recognize that we are all subject to such influences and to make a concerted effort to resist passive mental patterns and the known effects of groups when confronted by a situation calling for a caring response. In some cases, we should trust our first impulses more, even when those around us do not see what we see. This, too, has been an insight of feminist ethics. Diana Tietjens Meyers convincingly argues for the importance of heterodox moral perception—of seeing "social life in ways that challenge established cultural values and norms" and of seeing "suffering or harm that others do not notice" (1995a, 2). We can only see and act on the suffering that others do not notice when we successfully resist psychological tendencies either to lock into single perspectives or to conform. There are, as I see it, two main avenues for resisting. One is simply to attempt to improve our own individual psychologies. The other is to attempt to improve the social contexts within which our psychologies are embedded.

Improving our individual capacities for moral follow-through involves improving our moral perceptual habits and skills. It involves consciously and mindfully attempting to be a better moral responder. We must view ourselves as moral perceivers and commit to seeing and responding to moral saliences that we tend to miss. One way to do this is to consciously attempt to see even the most mundane situations from new perspectives. We can also try to "fine-tune" our perceptions in order better to pick up on suffering in others. Perhaps, most importantly, we can choose daily tasks and projects that best "train up" our desired moral perceptual capacities. Simply desiring to be better moral responders will not necessarily make us better responders. If we specifically wish to develop more real-time sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others, we should not choose to live our lives or to embark on careers in which we are literally removed from others or required to treat others coldly and impartially. We must mindfully place ourselves in day-to-day situations that give us chances to practice and improve.
Although there are steps that we as individual agents can take to resist mindless practices that prevent moral follow-through, I do not mean to insinuate that we can or should become socially isolated autonomous agents resisting the influence of others at every turn. We are inescapably social creatures, and as such must work together to improve our moral judgments and practices. Our most effective moral strategies involve improving the social situations and institutions within which we find ourselves. Families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and so on can and should be set up in ways that encourage seeing and addressing harms. For instance, if, in the studies described earlier, there had been clear “policies” given to study participants prior to their participating that included reporting any smoke coming through vents or investigating all cases where someone might have fallen, participants would have been much more likely to do so. In fact, a number of studies in social psychology show that providing a clearly defined, institutionally endorsed “channel” for addressing moral concerns greatly increases the chances that individuals will act on their concerns (Ross and Nisbett 1991, 46-58).

In such institutional settings as hospitals, for example, there should be well-documented and well-publicized policies and procedures for reporting and addressing ethical concerns. These concerns could be about a particular individual (e.g., an incompetent health-care professional) or about specific practices or policies that increase the risk of harm (e.g., institutional practices and procedures that result in increased risk for medical error or that discriminate by sex, race, or class). One good start for any institution is a well-publicized whistle-blowing policy with clearly articulated steps for how to proceed with an ethical concern accompanied by clear protections for those who initiate the whistle-blowing process. Hospitals that fail to encourage nurses to come forward, for example, or that fail to protect nurses from physician retribution when they do come forward are institutions that, in effect, severely inhibit moral responsiveness.

Communities, both large and small, can also develop strategies to encourage moral attentiveness and responsiveness. Neighbors can strategize how best to look out for each other and can develop clear “channels” both for requesting help (e.g., phone calls, emergency whistles, or alarms) and responding to potential threats (e.g., checking in or calling 911). Family members can work together on developing better communication skills and on avoiding mental and behavioral ruts. Community leaders and parents can work to be good examples and can encourage moral responsiveness in those they lead and parent.

Finally, as part of our education process, we can train ourselves and our students to see unnoticed moral harms and provide concrete ways to address such harms. Through various sorts of educational experiences, we can jar ourselves and our students out of moral oblivion and mindless ap-
proaches to life—providing new perspectives, categories, and insights that help us and them to see and respond in new ways. This is precisely what already-existing fields of study in feminist, race, and class theory can and should do.

NOTES

I am grateful to Margaret Urban Walker, Robert C. Richardson, James Lindemann Nelson, and Paul Benson for providing comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

1. For more on moral perception, see DesAutels (1996, 1998).

2. For more on internalism and its surrounding debates, see James Lindemann Nelson, chapter 6, in this volume.

3. A number of emotional disorders and occurrent emotional states are correlated with what cognitive psychologists refer to as “attentional biases.” Such biases result in selectively attending to certain emotion-relevant features within one’s situation at the expense of attending to other features. For example, see Mogg and Bradley (1999).

4. For a compelling example of a woman’s being aware and yet not fully aware of sexual harassment in her own workplace, see Conley’s autobiographical account in Walking Out on the Boys (1998). It was only well into her career as a professor of neurosurgery at Stanford University that sexual harassment within her own experience and her own medical school became fully salient to her, and thus only then that she attempted to address the harassment.