Blame for Not Knowing: Waiting for Moral Awakening in Sheila Gordon's *Waiting for the Rain*

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The first two lines of Sheila Gordon's beautiful novel of South Africa, *Waiting for the Rain*, distill the entire story from the white boy Frikkie's point of view: ‘The second thing Frikkie did when he arrived at his uncle's farm for the school holidays was look for Tengo. But first, he would run around exploring his favorite places to make sure that nothing had changed’ (3). Tengo, the black boy who works on the uncle's farm, is important to Frikkie as a childhood companion and playmate, but Tengo will always come second to Frikkie's desire to maintain his own privileged way of life: what Frikkie most wants to keep unchanged, it will turn out, is the system of apartheid itself that establishes Frikkie as heir to the farm with Tengo able to dream of nothing greater than someday being Frikkie's “boss-boy.” In painful contrast, from Tengo's point of view, as Tengo gains political awareness of the struggle of black South Africans against Boer dominance, the injustice of apartheid is so blatantly obvious that Frikkie should have been able to see it as clearly, and repudiate it as forcefully, as Tengo himself.

In the novel’s stunning climax, the boys, now grown to young men with Tengo an anti-apartheid protestor and Frikkie a soldier, meet for the first time after many years of separation: unaware of his victim's identity, Tengo brutally strikes Frikkie in the head, in self-defense, following an unprovoked military attack on a peaceful demonstration. The two talk, and while enough of their old friendship remains that neither betrays the other to his political comrades, Tengo's accusations against Frikkie are passionately intense. When Frikkie tries to excuse himself by pleading, “It’s not fair, Tengo. You can’t blame *me* for everything that’s wrong with this country,” Tengo replies, “I’m not blaming you for that... I’m blaming you for not *knowing*. For not *wanting* to know” (195). Later, Tengo tries again to explain: ‘“You still don't see,’ he said wearily, ‘you don’t see that the thing you did wrong was *not notice that anything was wrong*’” (197).

On the face of it, this is a fundamentally puzzling accusation, even if there also seems to be something intuitively right about it. For how can someone be morally blameworthy for what he doesn’t know, for what he doesn’t see, for what he doesn’t notice? Knowing, seeing, noticing are not, one would think, activities that are under one’s conscious or voluntary control, so they are inappropriate subjects for moral condemnation. In what follows, I will explore the question of blame for moral ignorance posed by Gordon's story and propose how she provides the resources for partial resolution of this philosophical paradox.

Moral Knowledge/Moral Ignorance

Frikkie's family, and the other whites portrayed in the story, could be regarded generally as kind and generous to the blacks they encounter. Frikkie's mother sends his sister's castoff clothes to Tengo's sister; his relatives allow Tengo's ailing cousin, Joseph, to visit the farm for his convalescence; Joseph's "madam" in the city sends discarded schoolbooks to Tengo, who yearns to read; her physician husband looks after black patients gratis and gives them free medicines. But Frikkie's family often speak derogatorily of "kaffir" inferiority and never question what they view as their God-given right to control South Africa; while the Millers, in Johannesburg, are conscience-stricken liberals, their challenging of apartheid extends only as far as envisioning a world in which blacks are treated much better but not a world in which the roles are reversed and they themselves are definitively displaced. So while the white characters are arguably morally decent human beings, they are not fully, or in some cases even partially, morally perceptive. They do not fully notice the wrongs in which they are complicit.

Tengo first hears explicit criticism of the established social order in his conversations with his urban cousin Joseph, who informs him about the treatment of blacks in the city, saying, "Man, Tengo, you really are a *domkop*. . . . You don't know anything about apartheid" (26). It is in Tengo's voluminous reading of the Millers' donated books, however, that he begins to realize that the version of history he hears the oubaas (old boss) telling Frikkie is not the whole story. According to Oom Koos, the Boers were oppressed by the British, who "forced them to free their slaves"; the British "favored savages, who weren't even Christians, over God-fearing Boers" (44). And according to Oom Koos, Tengo's dark-skinned people failed to keep the bargain they had made with the Boers to surrender their land, thus justifying violent reprisals against them: "they paid a heavy price for making bargains with us and not sticking to them" (45).

Reflecting on the conversation afterward, Tengo muses, "*Even though the oubaas is so strong and so rich and so clever. . . he doesn't know everything. And he doesn't know that he doesn't know everything"* (46). What Tengo knows from his reading, which the oubaas doesn't know, is the native Africans' side of the story, their different perspective on the alleged bargain struck, their radically alien view of property and ownership. For Tengo, books make possible a certain magic, which lies "in knowing—understanding certain things that Frikkie and the oubaas were ignorant of, which gave him a power over them that he hadn't had before, a power that lessened their hold on him. . . "(48).

The knowledge that Tengo gains is not knowledge of particular facts or dates, empirical knowledge of who did what, to whom, when. The bare facts of the Boer conquest of South Africa are not in dispute. What Tengo gains is moral knowledge—knowledge that Boer dominance is not morally justified; their continued supremacy is unjust. This knowledge gives Tengo power through his growing realization that his lesser place in the social order is also unjustified. While Tengo may continue to accept it outwardly, because he has no other viable option, he ceases to accept it inwardly. He no longer views himself as lesser. It is worth noting here that Tengo acknowledges that the oubaas himself does not realize the limits of his moral

knowledge; it is this limited vision that, as we shall see, seems to provide possible moral exculpation for the oubaas's uncritical assumption of his own superiority.

Moral knowledge and its limits are made salient at two other points in the novel. It is not only the dominant Boers who are morally ignorant but Tengo and his people as well. In a discussion with a sympathetic white pastor, Tengo raises the issue of his parents' generation's acceptance of white oppression: "The ones who are really in the struggle. . . are blaming our parents. They say our parents should not have put up with all this, with what the system does to black people" (148). Reverend Gilbert rejects this assignment of blame to Tengo's parents, because "they didn't really understand the nature—the intransigence—of white power," unlike Tengo's generation, which has "the advantage of history" (148). Lack of understanding, lack of knowledge, make a difference to moral accountability. Tengo returns to the issue of his own people's moral ignorance in his ultimate confrontation with Frikkie. To himself, he thinks, "*Here I've been accusing him and his relatives of accepting things the way they are, . . . yet my own parents were unquestioning, too*" (198). He reasons, "*Yet perhaps there is an excuse for my parents, for my aunts and uncles. . . since they are the victims. But even so, that is no excuse. . . because as soon someone becomes aware he is being wronged, then in some way that person is no longer a victim"* (198). With the power that comes with moral knowledge also comes the responsibility to act on that knowledge.

Yet Tengo has first-hand experience of a deliberate cultivation of ignorance, a conscious and careful unwillingness to know, of just the sort of which he accuses Frikkie. When he leaves the farm for school in Johannesburg, he encounters political radicals agitating for immediate social change. While Tengo wants to see apartheid overthrown, he also wants to continue his schooling, for he has a deep and driving hunger to learn, to study mathematics, science, literature, art. His desire for this kind of factual knowledge occasions his desire to avoid the full implications of his emerging moral knowledge: "while Tengo agreed with them about how unjust and unfair it all was, he didn't want to look up from his books until he achieved what he had set out to do" (127).

Tengo deliberately refrains from asking Joseph any questions about his political activism: "He knew that if he really wanted to know, Joseph would tell him. And once he was told, it would be like having to carry an extra burden; there would have to be decisions made, and choices, once he shouldered the burden of what Joseph was involved in" (130-31). Tengo is consciously trying to protect himself from the knowledge that change needs to come, and, more, he is conscious of his efforts to remain in willed ignorance. So in some sense, he is not unlike the South African whites, as Tengo views them, "trapped and cornered as they were by the narrowness of their vision" (203). Arguably, his ignorance is even more problematic, because it is chosen. Yet, it is hard to see Tengo as more blameworthy than Frikkie, the oppressed as more blameworthy than the oppressor.

This leads us, then, to the philosophical puzzle Gordon has uncovered. Can we be morally blameworthy for what we do not know? And do not even know that we do not know?

The Puzzle

At least since Aristotle's famous discussion of voluntary action in Book Three of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it has been widely recognized that ignorance is a legitimate defense against charges of moral wrongdoing. "Everything caused by ignorance is nonvoluntary," Aristotle claims (31), and so immune from blame. One is not blameworthy if one acts in ignorance of "what he is doing; about what or to what he is doing it; sometimes also what he is doing it with" (32). As examples, Aristotle mentions someone unwittingly thinking that his son is an enemy or that his barbed spear has a button on it. Now, sometimes we are responsible and so blameworthy for our ignorance itself, for not taking appropriate care in formulating our beliefs before we act— for example, not checking the barbed spear before thrusting with it. Sometimes, however, the ignorance that renders us non-culpable for the act it occasions is itself non-culpable: there is no reasonable way we could have known.

Aristotle draws a crucial distinction, however, between what he calls knowledge of particulars versus knowledge of the universal: knowledge that thrusting with the barbed spear will constitute an act of killing, versus the knowledge that killing is wrong. For Aristotle, only ignorance of particulars, only factual ignorance, undermines claims to moral responsibility; ignorance of the universal, moral ignorance, is itself a cause for blame. This Aristotelian distinction in reflected in the adage that "ignorance of the law is no excuse."

More recently, the significance of the distinction between these two kinds of ignorance has been challenged. Why should the objects of our ignorance matter so greatly? Princeton University philosopher Gideon Rosen, in his essay "Culpability and Ignorance," repudiates the view that factual ignorance excuses in a way that moral ignorance does not. Rosen considers the case of slavery in the ancient world during a time when "the legitimacy of chattel slavery was simply taken for granted.… The evidence suggests ... that until quite late in antiquity it never occurred to anyone to object to slavery on grounds of moral or religious principle" (64). Here we might remember that Aristotle wrote in his *Politics* that "It is clear that by nature some are free, others slaves, and that for these it is both just and expedient that they should serve as slaves" (69). Aristotle himself, then, was apparently ignorant of the "universal" truth that slavery is unjustified.

Against the platitude that "ignorance of the law is no excuse," Rosen cites the McNaughten test for insanity as a criminal defense, whereby "a criminal defendant is to be acquitted if by reason of mental disease or defect, he failed to know what he was doing, or that it was wrong" (71). But mental disease or defect is not the only sources of moral ignorance; moral ignorance, as Rosen has shown, can come as well from widespread cultural assumptions. Likewise, Michael J. Zimmerman argues that most moral ignorance is non-culpable, and so

exculpatory. Zimmerman points out that “one is never in direct control of whether one is ignorant” (418). Applying this insight to cases of moral vices such as racism and sexism, Zimmerman concludes that “responsibility for these vices and the vicious behavior in which they issue is incurred less frequently, perhaps far less frequently, than is commonly supposed” (425). This is not to say that racism is not wrong, but it is to say that the racist should not be blamed for being a racist. If Rosen and Zimmerman are correct, then, Tengo is indeed unfair to blame Frikkie for not only his actions but, even more, for the ignorance that motivated them.

Now, even Rosen and Zimmerman concede that this conclusion is unwelcome. So how can we resist it? Sometimes, when someone fails to know something, we say, “She *should* have known.” What does it mean to say that someone should know something? One thing it can mean is that we have a general responsibility to be reasonably knowledgeable about the world and our actions in it, including the rightness and wrongness of how we act. This is to return us to Aristotle's earlier point that ignorance can in some cases itself be culpable. The student who scores poorly on a test can’t protest his failing grade on the grounds that he couldn’t help his ignorance of the required material. He should have come to class, read the textbook, studied his notes: he *could* have known, and so he *should* have known.

In 1879, British philosopher W. K. Clifford published an essay, “The Ethics of Belief,” arguing that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (249). Clifford goes on to say that if a man holds on to a childhood belief without questioning it, “the life of that man is one long sin against mankind” (249). The danger to society from unexamined beliefs, Clifford avers, is “not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery” (248). For Clifford, we have a moral obligation to know the truth of all our beliefs.

But Clifford’s rigidly skeptical stance seems extreme and unfounded. To meet its stringent requirements would be to spend our lives in paralyzing attempts to verify all the beliefs, both empirical and normative, on which we need to rely in order to live. Some have tried to modify Clifford's sweeping epistemic demands by saying that the responsibility is only to take care to verify our most important claims, those most central to how we live. We might not, however, even recognize which claims these are or how they could possibly be scrutinized.

Rosen, discussing the slave owner of antiquity, takes it as a plausible principle that “one is normally under no obligation to rethink the uncontroversial normative principles that form the framework for social life. One is obliged to reflect in hard cases, in response to serious criticism, in response to known diversity of opinion and in response to perceived tension in one's moral views. But when what one takes to be a transparently correct moral verdict meets with no such friction, one is neither negligent nor reckless in failing to subject that verdict to moral scrutiny” (65). Thus, Rosen would be sympathetic to Frikkie as he pleads to Tengo, “How could I think it could be any different? Everyone—my ma, my pa, my uncle and my aunt, my teachers, the

dominee at our church—they all taught me that this is the way it's supposed to be. So why shouldn't I accept it then?" (196).

I propose that the answer that Tengo could give to Frikkie, and that we could give to Rosen, would go like this. Unlike his parents, Frikkie does experience some moral "friction" or "tension" about the justice of apartheid, or at least has the materials for such friction abundantly present in his day-to-day life. The source of this potentially disturbing and enlightening friction is none other than the very friendship between the two boys itself. Although Frikkie is admittedly a singularly unreflective individual, a self-confessed reluctant and poor student, his years of intimacy with Tengo give him every reason to know what his relatives do not and arguably cannot know: that Tengo is a person like himself. Tengo has taught Frikkie to milk a cow; Frikkie has taught Tengo how to swim; both boys yearn for a glimpse of the sea. The close and enduring friendship between the boys makes Frikkie, morally, both more admirable, because he interacts comfortably with a black boy as a relative equal, and more culpable, because the friendship gives Frikkie precisely what his other relatives lack: the resources to engage in moral self-scrutiny. In their final conversation, Tengo reminds Frikkie of the time when they were playing together, covered in mud, and were served their snack together in the yard: "You got a nice cup and a plate with flowers painted on, and I got a tin mug and a tin plate" (196). The subtext of Tengo's remark is that it might be appropriate for master and servant to be treated so differently, but not for two friends, if the two truly are friends.

While Frikkie uses their friendship to excuse himself—pointing to a time he sacrificed a cherished marble to buy his sister's silence when she was about to tattle on Tengo—it is the friendship itself which undermines the deeper excuse of his moral ignorance. How could he have known that apartheid was wrong? Because Frikkie and Tengo, white boy and black boy, were friends. Aristotle, in his celebrated discussion of friendship in Books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, writes that "The excellent person is related to his friend in the same way as he is related to himself, since a friend is another himself" (150). For Aristotle, friendship then becomes a source of self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the good.

We can put Frikkie's dilemma in this way: if he were truly Tengo's friend, he should have known their inequality was wrong; if he did not know that their inequality was wrong, he was not truly Tengo's friend. Frikkie cannot have it both ways: he cannot claim both friendship and ignorance. For Frikkie, however, as Gordon so skillfully and poignantly shows us, the desire to be Tengo's true friend comes second to the desire to remain ignorant of the conditions that make true friendship between the two impossible.

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