Roles and Responsibilities with Robin Zheng

Christiane Wisehart, producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

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Christiane: We're facing some pretty big problems these days. And whether they're things like climate change, racism or poverty, these problems are all bigger than we are as individuals. So big, in fact, it can be tempting to give up responsibility for social change altogether. Today's guest, the philosopher Robin Zheng, says that's a mistake. She's come up with a way of thinking about social responsibility and what *we* can do as individuals. It's called the Role Ideal Model.

Robin Zheng: Each of us is responsible for injustice in virtue of our social role, where that might be the role of being a parent, being a worker, being a citizen and so on and so forth, um, because, our performing those roles every day is what maintains an overall system of injustice.

Christiane: Stay tuned for all of that and more on today's episode of Examining Ethics! And make sure you stick around until the end--we've got a great listener response from last month's show.

{end theme tune}

Christiane: There's a lot of injustice in the world today. And we often categorize that injustice in a couple of different ways. There's individual injustice and then there's something called structural injustice. Individual injustice is pretty easy to understand--it's harm that plays out between individuals. Let's say I run a small business and my employee, Siobhan, has a newborn child at home. She requests some time off for maternity leave. I refuse her request, and explain that I don't care about her kid--I need her to come to work so I don't lose out on money I was going to use to buy a Ferrari. That would be an example of individual injustice--the harm plays out between individuals as a result of my individual behavior.

Structural injustice is different. It's harm that plays out on the level of social structures. And social structures are basically big social systems. So it's things like the economy, or institutions like government or the public education system. Our guest, the philosopher Robin Zheng, explained that social structures can play a part in shaping our behavior as individuals. Social structures are also where structural injustice plays out.

Robin Zheng: It's not that a social structure completely determines what you're gonna do and makes all your choices for you. But on the other hand, it does put pressure on you to make choices in certain ways and not others. So to take a very simple analogy, it's as if you were walking along, and suddenly you hit a fence. Well, you could climb over the fence and keep going straight ahead. But most likely, you'll change your direction and kind of follow along the fence in the direction that it's channeling you. So I think that's really a useful way of thinking

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about social structures and the way that structural injustice works. There's an example given by Sally Haslanger of a heterosexual couple that is trying to decide which of them is going to stay home from work to take care of their new baby. Both the husband and the wife, in this case, are completely unbiased, they're totally, equally committed to gender equality, but, when they're trying to make their decision, if it's the case that they're employer's offer maternity leave but don't offer paternity leave, that's kind of like walking into that fence. Right? I mean, they could decide that the woman is the one to keep her job, but there are all of these forces that are kind of pushing in the other direction, and that's without even including all of the gender norms and social pressures that come along in nonmaterial senses too. So, in this case, it's easy to see how eventually that's gonna result in less status and power for the woman, even though we stipulated from the very beginning that there were no sexist attitudes in involved here. So that I think is the central idea of a structural injustice. It's some kind of harm or a disadvantage that accrues to a group and that persists even if we take away individual bad actions or individual bad attitudes. So that's not to say that people don't have bad actions or bad attitudes. But a structural injustice is this kind of undeserved harm or disadvantage that is suffered by some groups which *not* primarily caused just by individual bad actions or attitudes.

Christiane: Most of us recognize (or at least I hope we all recognize) that we're responsible for our individual actions. So in that example where I'm forcing my employee Siobhan to come to work after giving birth, it would be relatively straightforward for me to figure out how to behave better. The question for today's show is what are we supposed to do in the face of structural injustice? Are we as individuals responsible for injustice that happens in social structures and systems? Robin is trying to answer these questions. But before we dive into her answers, let's take a short detour into the origins of her work. She's building her ideas on a foundation created in part by another philosopher, Iris Marion Young. Just before Iris Young died, she was working through what it means to be responsible for societal problems**.**

Robin Zheng: So on traditional models of responsibility, when we say that you're responsible for something, what we mean by that is something like you're blameworthy for it, or maybe you could be punished for it. But what Young says about her new model of responsibility, is that she's talking about something totally different. When she says that you're responsible for injustice, she doesn't mean that you can be blamed for it or punished for it. What she means is that you can be assigned some of the burdens of rectifying it.

Christiane: So even though we as individuals shouldn't be *blamed* for structural injustice, we're all still responsible for trying to create social change. Iris Young argues that we all have to take up the burden of working together with others towards that change. But "working together with others" isn't very specific. So Robin came up with an extension of Iris Young's ideas. She calls it the Role Ideal Model of social responsibility.

Robin Zheng: Each of us is responsible for injustice in virtue of our social role, where that might be the role of being a parent, being a worker, being a citizen and so on and so forth, um, because, our performing those roles every day is what maintains an overall system of injustice.

CW: Since we're all a part of society, we all have different social roles we play.

Robin Zheng: So the way that I think of social roles is as kind of bundles of expectations that people have of one another. So there are these pairs of relationships where there are certain

expectations that define the kinds of behavior that are intelligible and appropriate for people to perform within that relationship. It makes sense, for instance, for a teacher to tell a student to read something, to correct their mistakes, and these are kinds of behaviors that it wouldn't really make sense for that person to do with someone who wasn't their student. The idea is that anyone who stands in this particular kind of relationship, the relationship between teacher and student, is subject to these expectations, such that it makes sense when they do those things. These expectations get enforced by others around us. So, when we violate the boundaries in a bad way, others will blame us, or they might even punish us, and we might also sanction ourselves. We might feel bad and feel guilty. And then when we perform the role well in accordance with those expectations, they will reward it, or we might feel good about ourselves.

Christiane: These social roles are a huge part of what make up the structures of society. We need things like buildings and books to make up the school system, but we could probably make do without them. But without people inhabiting the roles of teachers and students, we simply wouldn't have schools. Now we can't all be teachers or students, so we need people to inhabit other roles, like farmer, doctor, and so on. So all of us, playing our different roles, are what make the structures of society possible. So when a societal structure is unjust, we're all, in a sense, responsible. Robin explained that our social roles are where individual choices meet up with social structures.

Robin Zheng: Social roles are part of the reason why there is such injustice because people, in order to fulfill their roles, will do things that they say, "Well, I have to do this because, um, that's what my job says, or that's what is expected of me, or that's my duty." Once you start viewing injustice as a structural problem, and not just a problem of individual actions. You see that all of us, um, just by going about, our everyday business are reproducing these social structures every day. Because all stand in these relationships to one another, we automatically occupy different social roles and it's because we keep acting in ways that conform to the expectations of associated with those social roles, that we maintain the social structures, which are what constrains people's decisions and behaviors in ways that maintain injustice. So there's no way to escape responsibility, because just by virtue of being a member of society, you're enmeshed in all of these different social roles which put you in relationship with many, many different people.

Christiane: Before you get too depressed about all of this responsibility, Robin has something else to add. So she says our social roles are like a double-edged sword. They're what make us responsible for the big structural problems we face. But they're also what can help us solve these big problems together.

Robin Zheng: Because you have certain powers and resources in your role, you can use those powers and resources to push those boundaries of your role. And by pushing those boundaries, you influence how other people can perform their roles and so slowly, we get change throughout the social structures which are made up of these roles. So to give you an example of the teacher, let's say that, I'm a professor and my graduate student teaching assistants want to unionize. Well, I'm in a position as a professor to use my role to support them because I have the authority, for instance, to say, "Hey, look, I know that my grad students can teach a lot better when they're not anxious and stressed about paying their bills and how they're gonna deal with tuition." So, I could sign on to an open letter. I could have a meeting with the dean, maybe even the university president to back these grad students who are trying to form the union. And, on

the one hand, what's happening here is that I am performing my role as a good professor, right? I'm trying to ensure this high quality of teaching for my students, but on the other hand, I'm also pushing the boundaries of my role as professor because I'm trying to influence the university president or others in the administration to perform their role differently, by trying to get them to recognize and- and bargain with the union. So when I undertake these actions, I'm opening up options for them, by changing the expectations of how they should perform their roles.

Christiane: To create change within our social roles, we have to think critically about what it would mean to perform our role best. Robin calls this striving for a "role ideal."

Robin Zheng: Your role ideal is your own individual interpretation or conception of how you can best perform that role. The thing about roles, is that they're never totally 100% fully defined. So even if you know that your role as a parent is to, you know, feed your children, the role isn't gonna tell you exactly what you should feed them. Or when you should feed them. So everyone needs to have some kind of role ideal, some kind of personal conception which gets based on their own lived experience, their own values, their own beliefs, which is gonna guide them in making all of these countless, infinitely many little tiny decisions that everyone has to make about how to perform their role. That role ideal will guide us in making decisions that will allow us to push the boundaries of our roles in ways that bring about changes around us. So for example, if I'm a teacher again, I could think about, "Well, what do I need to actually perform my role well as a teacher? I need to think about what course offerings we might be missing. I need to think about what kinds of stresses my students are dealing with when they come into the classroom, which might make it harder or easier for them to learn." It's by asking those kinds of questions that I might start to think about, for example, diversifying my syllabus so that we read more works by philosophers of color or philosophers from other marginalized groups. So I think that holds for other social roles as well. When you have a role ideal of what it would be like, what it would mean for you to perform your role well, then you start to ask all of these questions about what things would need to change in order for you to be able to do that and that's when you start taking these actions which will have the effect of starting to change the social structures around us, when everyone else around you is also doing the same thing.

Christiane: By figuring out our role ideals and then trying to meet those ideal expectations, we end up changing the big systems we're interacting with.

Robin Zheng: So when you have everyone working on performing their roles better and pushing the boundaries in the sense of trying to change conditions such that they perform their roles better, that I think, can put pressure across the entire system in a way that then either kind of slowly leads us to evolve to a new equilibrium, or that makes us prepared when a crisis strikes to push it in one direction, rather than the other. And also, I think helps to make certain changes stick.

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Christiane: There's a way in which the Role Ideal Model can feel burdensome and overwhelming. But Robin says we shouldn't feel paralyzed by our responsibility.

Robin Zheng: When the role ideal model says that you're responsible for injustice, it's not saying that you're blameworthy for it, that you should feel bad about the ways in which your

actions are contributing to injustice. Instead, what it means, when it says that you have responsibility, is just that you, along with everyone else who's responsible, are expected to take up some of the burden of changing the unjust structures you're a part of. So what that actually looks like, when you're trying to make some of those infinitely many tiny decisions that you always have to make about how to perform your role, we often make those decisions non-consciously, or without much thought, we do whatever is easy. What I think you're responsible for then, is just adding a different kind of consideration into the mix. So, having considerations of injustice just put on the table while you're making the decision, that's what I think you're accountable for. So in other words,-what you're accountable for is performing all of your roles with a raised consciousness, with some additional awareness of the possible implications of these small decisions that you're making. Or- or big decisions too.

Christiane: Once we understand the power and responsibility in our own roles, we can use the Role Ideal Model to remind other individuals of the power they have in *their* roles.

Robin Zheng: So as I've been emphasizing, the kind of responsibility here is not the kind of responsibility that licenses blame. So rather than blaming somebody, you can remind them: you know, as a good professor or a good teacher or a good parent, here are some of the values that I have, and here's something that I think, uh, I could do in order to better achieve those values. So, that kind of feedback I think, that kind of criticism, is an appropriate way of holding one another accountable for taking up this burden of structural transformation without blaming or singling somebody out as doing something wrong when they, uh, contribute to injustice.

Christiane: Structural injustice is by definition an enormous problem to try and tackle. And while it's nice to know we can't necessarily be blamed for the big injustices the world faces, it's still tough to realize that we're responsible for creating change, no matter who we are. In my own life, I'm often overwhelmed by the number of things I could be doing. There's a rally every weekend, petitions flooding my inbox, and pleas for money everywhere. I *want* to help, but I'm often at a loss as to what exactly I should be spending my time on. What should be my priority? What should I do with my limited resources? Robin's Role Ideal Model helps me figure out those questions. Perhaps my role as a caregiver keeps me away from a protest about gender equality. But in Robin's model, my role as a caregiver is where I can actually best effect change. I can model gender equality for my children. I can work with other caregivers to find strategies to help each other out.

I usually try to stay somewhat neutral when it comes to the ideas we cover on the show, but I have to admit, this one has really made me reconsider the way I view personal responsibility, and I think for the better. I asked Robin about why *she* cares so much about this model, and why she defends it.

Robin Zheng: It's really important for me to fight against a certain kind of attitude that says, "That's not my problem." What I'm concerned to challenge is this idea that just because you're not a woman, or just because you're not a person of color or because you are middle class yourself, doesn't mean that you're not implicated in these larger injustices. You are. We all are. It doesn't mean that you should be blamed for things that you do, but the ordinary things that you do, just living your life in this unjust world, are part of what's maintaining that unjust world. And so, I don't think that you can say, "It's not my problem" just because you personally are not being affected.

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A lot of people who care about social injustice are people who might be viewed as do-gooders or moral saints, and I don't think that challenging injustice should be something that's optional in this way. And that's just something that do-gooders care about. So I think that's where working on this theory in a very careful and philosophical way was important to me because it gave me a way of spelling out exactly why it is that it is everyone's problem and why everyone should care. Even if they're not personally affected.

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Christiane: If you want to know more about Robin Zheng's work, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org where we have a list of her scholarship and other related resources.

Let us know what you think of today's show. Did we help you rethink how you view your own roles? Has your idea of what it means to be responsible shifted in any way? Record a voice memo on your phone and email it to us at examiningethics@gmail.com. Be sure to include your first name and where you're from. Or, if you're shy about recording your voice, send us an email with your thoughts and we'll share it with our listeners.

We got some great listener feedback from last month's show about standpoint epistemology with the philosopher Briana Toole. And just to refresh your memory, this is what standpoint epistemology is.

Briana Toole: Standpoint epistemology, roughly speaking, is the view that knowledge is sensitive to features related to a person's social identity. So, knowledge is sensitive to features like your race, your sex, your gender, your sexual orientation, your class, your religious affiliation, and so on. So the things that you know about the world will depend, in some sense, on how you engage with the world. And how you engage with the world is going to depend, in a large part, on whether or not you're black, or you're a woman, or you're poor, and so on.

Christiane: Listener Linda sent in this response to the episode:

Linda: Hello my name's Linda and I'm from Melbourne, Australia. And I just wanted to say, I really enjoyed your episode 33 about identity and philosophy. And I wanted to ask the question, or make the statement that the examples of identity that were given were really interesting, but, maybe limited? Sexuality, multi-cultural background, things like that, are only one part of how people identify. When I was listening, I was thinking, I identify as someone who's been through the foster-care system and been adopted, and live in a multi-cultural family now, and perhaps could give really insightful knowledge around that experience and what policies and things around that sort of activity might be rather than someone who's not gone through--you know, had a traditional upbringing and what not. And then that made me think about people who have had other experiences that then create their identity, like maybe they're a veteran, or they've had a disability, or they've been the only child, or come from a big family, or other thing like that that maybe aren't as surface as the examples that you gave, so I wonder if your theory extends

to more complex or transient identity elements. So that's my only comment, but I really enjoyed the episode and thank you so much for putting it on. Okay, bye!

Christiane: We thought this was such an interesting comment, so we asked Linda if it would be okay to share it with Briana Toole. Here's what Briana had to say:

Briana Toole: This is such a great question and my thanks to Linda for sending it in. Linda wonders if standpoint epistemology can accommodate other facts about a person's background beyond social identity, like one's status as a veteran, or a person who moved through the foster care system. Now broadly speaking the answer is yes. While in my work on standpoint epistemology I focus on facts about one's race or gender, and how these facts make a difference to what we know, standpoint epistemology more generally is a view about how facts about our social situatedness can make such a difference. And naturally, if one is a veteran or a product of the foster care system, this might engender a situated perspective that gives you knowledge that others lack. The worry, however, is that we don't want to make the view so broad that it becomes trivial. So while I'd grant that being a member of the foster care system means that a person will have certain knowledge that I lack as someone who did not move through the foster care system, we wouldn't want to overextend and say that being a middle child, for instance, gives one certain knowledge that non-middle children lack. Of course this might lead one to wonder, where do we draw the line? How do we figure out which facts about a person are socially relevant? Unfortunately I can't say a great deal about that now in such a sort response. But I can recommend for interested listeners the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on feminist epistemology and philosophy of science. Or feel free to email me at briana.toole@baruch.cuny.edu.

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Easter Egg:

Christiane: [laughter] I do like that…[singing] Since we're all a part of society, we all have different roles we play…[laughter] [spoken] And that's how we're responsible.

Eleanor Price, producer: [off mic] And that's the show, folks! [laughter]