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Standing by or Standing Up?—How Philosophy Can (In)form Our Understanding of Bystander Behaviours in Workplace Bullying Dynamics

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Abstract: There is increasing awareness of the value of interdisciplinary collaboration within academia. Scholars argue that by drawing upon the conceptual, methodological, and interrogative paradigms of at least two disparate disciplines, researchers are challenged to re-evaluate and reconsider their own discipline-centric assumptions. A consequence of such purposeful *boundary-blurring* is an increased rigour and richness in the analysis of raw data, as well as the development of revealing insights through the novel application of discrete conceptual perspectives and theories. In such a way, dominant, taken-for-granted methodological and analytical assumptions are destabilised, as researchers are obliged to embrace contrasting perspectives while reassessing the epistemological foundations of their work. This paper focuses on the phenomenon of bystander responses to workplace bullying dynamics. While traditional scholarship into workplace bullying emanates from disciplines such as business, psychology, law, medicine and sociology, for example, this paper argues that philosophy, as a subject/field, may provide the researcher with a fresh interrogative lens through which to (re)view the phenomenon of workplace bullying, along with the consequential response of bystanders to such noxious behaviours. It suggests that, by drawing upon the philosophical concept of virtue ethics—which posits the question “What would a *good* or *virtuous* person do?”—we are afforded a robust theoretical framework to support a thoughtful and reasoned destabilization of contemporary perspectives on bystander behaviours and motivations.

Keywords: workplace bullying; bystanders; interdisciplinary research; philosophy; virtue ethics



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No such thing
as innocent
bystanding.

—Seamus Heaney *Mycenae Lookout*

1. Introduction

There has been an aggregate (r)evolution over the past three decades in respect to academic engagement with the phenomenon of workplace bullying [1]. Early studies of incivility or *mobbing* at work focussed, in many cases, on cause and effect and made tentative suggestions as to the underlying organisational and cultural factors which trigger the development of negative interpersonal interaction in the workplace [2–6]. However, with this organic deepening of our understanding of workplace bullying, a more comprehensive picture emerged over time; one which positioned workplace bullying as a negative interpersonal dynamic with profound consequences for both the organisation and the individual [7–9]. Much of our existing knowledge of workplace bullying derives from discipline-specific engagement with data and the literature. The contribution of scholars from the broad fields of psychology, management, education, business, human resources (HR), health, law and sociology, for example, has been profound, and this work

continues to shape government policy and, indeed, public understanding of workplace bullying internationally. Many of these disciplines have employed subject-specific or broader conceptual frameworks to support their interrogation of workplace bullying dynamics. These include Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological theory (psychology), Foucauldian conceptualisation of power (sociology), grounded theory (health) and Novak's learning theory (education), for example [10–13]. However, there is a growing acceptance that, given the complex nature of workplace bullying, and the inherent challenges undertaking research in the area presents [10], a broad interdisciplinary approach could further facilitate more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon [14,15].

This paper explores the role of bystanders as performative actors in the development and maintenance of workplace bullying interactions. It suggests that a robust application of philosophical perspectives and techniques can shape the dominant, positivistic discourses which often (in)form much of the scholarship on workplace incivility [1,6,9]. By so doing, a more sensitive and, ultimately, deeper understanding is facilitated of the various determining factors at play, specifically in the context of the behaviours and attitudes of witnesses to negative interpersonal behaviour in the workplace.

While philosophers such as Foucault, for example, have previously been employed to critically examine the exercise of power between bullies and targets, as well as the impact of different disciplinary technologies on the docile target [16–19], there has been somewhat of a lacuna in drawing on traditional philosophical discourses/frameworks to enrich our epistemology. This paper considers the moral and ethical dilemmas for bystanders as to whether they should intervene to protect the target or, alternatively, whether they have a commensurate obligation to remain aloof in order to protect themselves and, ultimately, their careers. It also challenges researchers and scholars to broaden their disciplinary scope and, in so doing, (re)view toxic workplace behaviours in general, and the actions of bystanders in particular, from a new and revealing perspective.

2. Workplace Bullying and Bystanders

Bullying behaviours in the workplace have direct, deleterious consequences for the individual target in the form of loss of income, sick leave, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation as well as a range of physical symptoms, including headaches, increased blood pressure and disturbed sleep patterns [15,20]. Furthermore, research across three decades has consistently indicated the significant impact workplace bullying and harassment also has upon the organisation, including poor productivity, loss of loyalty, active disengagement, turnover of staff, loss of reputation and, critically, litigation [21–25]. While workplace bullying is often considered in terms of a noxious *dyadic* relationship (i.e., the bully versus the target/victim), there is increasing acknowledgment of the ripple-like effect of toxic behaviour on others within the immediate work-environment. Researchers have recently highlighted the experiences of such individuals; persons who may not be active, or direct, participants in the negative interpersonal interactions and are, for the most part, colleagues/co-workers (they may also be customers/clients or, indeed, members of the public) [26,27]. However, these bystanders are not disinterested, docile agents in the dynamic; at the very least they witness the incivility (either physically or online) and, accordingly, consciously select what they consider to be an appropriate, proportionate response [28,29].

Scholars [30] devised a typography of such bystanders, based on two behavioural tropes (1) active/passive (behaviours) and (2) constructive/destructive (outcomes). Drawing on this typography, the authors argue that the active/constructive bystander intervenes directly to save/protect the target while the passive/constructive bystander does nothing tangible except offer sympathy or manifesting empathy. The active/destructive bystander facilitates the bully and gets involved in the behaviour themselves while the Passive/Destructive bystander strategically avoids the dynamic and denies any moral responsibility to intervene. Others [27] suggest that *fear* may be a motivating factor in bystander behaviour. Fear that intervening will cause the situation to escalate or that it may

position the bystander themselves as exposed and vulnerable to attack. They also maintain that these responses may be shaped by the bystander's perceptions of the *deservedness* of the behaviour, where they perceive the blame lies and the severity of the actions. They argue that the power status of the bystander will also mediate their likelihood to intervene. Drawing on the extant literature ([31–33] for example), bystander responses may be summarised through a conceptual spectrum of *inertia* (do nothing), *intervention* (asking the bully to stop or protecting the target) or *involvement* (deciding, to a greater or lesser extent, to participate in the bullying behaviour) or, indeed, a combination thereof.

Whatever the response, an uncomfortable question remains as to the moral or ethical responsibilities of bystanders to themselves as well as to their colleagues and the organisation itself. While the concept of moral/ethical leadership has been explored in the literature [34–37], there is, with some notable exceptions [38], a relative dearth of literature which examines the ethical responsibilities and motivations of the employee or colleague bystander in bullying dynamics. This paper addresses this lacuna.

3. Interdisciplinary Research

Interdisciplinary research is increasingly encouraged by universities as a cost-effective way to foster high-quality and high-impact research. Indeed, many research organisations and universities are systematically reorganising their internal structures to facilitate and support this approach [39]. Interdisciplinary research has two main characteristics; firstly, that the research methodology draws upon at least two discrete disciplines and, secondly, that the nature of the collaborative relationship is dynamic [40]. Indeed, it is key that the competencies and theoretical frameworks for both scientific disciplines are integrated across all aspects and stages of the research process [41].

In terms of the specific functionality/worth of philosophy in empirical interdisciplinary research, it has been suggested that philosophical discourses provide the researcher with the conceptual tools to refine research questions, frame arguments, challenge pre-conceived ideas and test hypotheses [42]. Indeed, disrupting the traditional taken-for-granted nature of knowledge-generation is, in itself, a pragmatic justification for interdisciplinary research and may be seen as an *applied* functionality of philosophical inquiry [43]. Critically, philosophy challenges us to question our reliance on empirical, scientific evidence as the only/best generative source of knowledge or objective *truth* [44]. While engaging in interdisciplinary research can foster tensions between different approaches or disciplines, philosophy can support the healing of such tensions and the resolution of disputes by challenging the actors to engage reflexively in their understanding of epistemological processes [45].

This paper presents a number of philosophical positions which challenge the reader to (re)consider the (in)actions of bystanders who witness workplace bullying against a theoretical framework which subverts normative, positivistic understanding of actors and actions. Drawing on concepts such as morality and virtue ethics (and questioning the notion of excellence of character), the reader is invited to consciously reflect upon alternative justifications and rationalisations for bystander behaviours and responses.

4. Morality and Ethics

The processes of rationalisation undertaken by any bystander in response to an incident of workplace bullying or harassment are complex ([46,47], for example). As noted previously, there is a rich body of scholarship which proffers comprehensive analysis of *what the bystander does* (behaviour) and *why they do it* (motivation). Indeed, such research underpins the ongoing, and necessary diversification of the epistemological discourses which surround workplace bullying. Building on this work, this section considers the bystanders' responsibilities (if any) to the seemingly competing impulses of self-protection and collegial solidarity, highlighting the conceptual distinction between morality and ethics, before focusing on *virtue ethics*, which asks how virtuous excellence in the form of the *phronimos*—an embodied fusion of ethical virtues and intellectual excellences [48]—

offers a plausible alternate framework to better understand and potentially overcome bystander behaviours.

For the purposes of this paper, “ethics includes convictions about which kinds of lives are good or bad for a person to lead, while morality includes principles about how a person should treat other people” (p. 485) [49]. Therefore, while morality concerns itself with “the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which [a happy existence] might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured” [50], ethics is the systematic study of the nature and sources of morality, including the conditions under which moral principles hold true [51]. Morals centre values *within* the person, while ethics looks at critiquing how these values play out in a world where they are often at odds with one another. Interpreted this way, ethics seeks to discern, systematise, scrutinise, evaluate and understand what principles, if any, individuals draw upon when deciding on a morally *good* course of action, especially when there are competing moral duties at stake. Therefore, to more fully and accurately understand bystander motivations and behaviours, scholars require the application of both conceptual apparatuses to meaningfully progress these discourses further.

Reflecting the neo-Aristotelian perspective (towards which this paper will later return), this necessitates a polygonal understanding of the *phronimos*—the paradigm of virtuous exemplarity who not only *knows* what to do and how to act, but, *ipso facto*, *does* so. Since virtue, justice, wisdom, understanding and first/third personal reasons-attunement are the hallmarks of the wise person (*phronimos*), the central claim here is that moral exemplars (*phronimoi*) are best equipped to overcome some of the key contextualised constraints to which even well-meaning agents succumb in bystander scenarios, namely, *audience inhibition*, *self-preservation* and *diffusion of responsibility*, [52], concepts which mirror the idea of inertia, intervention and involvement noted previously.

To be clear—this paper does not advocate an absolutist, Procrustean, rules-based approach to ‘doing the right thing’. Instead, it contests this myopic, essentialist position and challenges the very idea of an immutable and reductive ‘right course of action’, suggesting instead that *context* demands a degree of subjective-objective elasticity in response to particularist situations and dynamics. Mindful of this position, the paper argues for a reasons-based and exemplarist-centred assessment of claims to rightness or wrongness (and associated degrees). Therefore, for any judgement or action to be good (literally defensible), the exemplarist actor must be able to provide strong defensible rationalisation for their conduct [53].

However, before we examine how *virtue ethics*, with its exemplarist focus, can provide an innovative lens through which the reader may view bystander behaviours, this paper is positioned within a particular framework of epistemic assumptions. First, morality is taken to be normative rather than descriptive. Broadly construed, the distinction between both may be framed as follows:

1. *Descriptive morality* refers to certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group or accepted by an individual for her own behaviour, while,
2. *Normative morality* refers to a code of conduct that, under specific conditions, would be put forward by all rational [reasons-responsive] people [54].

The distinction is important because human beings apply ethical concepts (such as duty, goodness, virtue, vice, justice, for example) to human (inter)actions/inactions and personal characteristics [55]. Without acknowledging the normative-descriptive distinction, the use of concepts such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ remain decidedly relativistic, unhelpful, and imprecise. This paper, reflecting [56], frames definitions of ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ in terms of attitudes *in favour* and *against*—capturing what is appropriate, correct or fitting to take towards a good or bad thing. In other words, to value something as ‘good’ is “to hold certain positive attitudes towards it and for acting in certain ways in regard to it” (p. 96) [57]. On this basis, broader ethical judgments about ‘right or wrong’/‘good or bad’ can be reduced to, “claims about reasons—more specifically about the adequacy of reasons for accepting or rejecting principles under certain conditions” (p. 3) [57]. To label actions as

‘good’ or ‘bad’, and to value/appraise them as such, implies that a deliberative process of reasoning informs such a stance, including one’s attitudes and actions toward it. Therefore, should a bystander intervene to protect a colleague from bullying or harassment, they have rationally justified (given compelling cogent reasons) explicating their own responses, as well as the personal, embedded values that underpin them.

Ethicists are not so concerned, per se, with whether someone has an operative reason for doing X or Y. Instead, they are interested in whether the reason is *good*, specifically, “a consideration that really counts in favour of the thing in question” (p. 19) [57]. Accordingly, ethics is a dialogically focused mode of collective rational inquiry, one whose business is conducted within a reason-asking, reason-giving, reason-evaluating domain [58]. This implies that one key factor in determining the rightness or wrongness of an individual agent’s actions takes place from their embedded, context-specific point of view. Such deliberations take account of the factive limitations and constraints faced by the actor at that moment in time. These salient considerations are then factored into the all-things-considered determination reached by wise, objective, and impartial analysts. Such insider–outsider triangulated perspectives preclude any *rush to judgement*. This critical reflexivity does not render the project of third-personal evaluation invalid; on the contrary, it safeguards the centrality of perspectival realism in any, and all, moral and ethical deliberative processes [59]. At stake here is adherence to a serviceable view of ethical realism (including relevant limiting factors) when determining what the ‘good’ is in a given situation. What is imperative is a triangulated approach—one which gives due weight to the irreducible situatedness of *lived experience*, while also seeking to revise and correct such dispositions and behaviours based on first-personal/third-personal conversations and resultant determinations. Only then can we protect bystanders from reductive positionalities of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and progress to more sophisticated, ethically attuned analyses of the phenomena.

5. Virtue Ethics

Having briefly reflected upon the conceptual distinction between morality and ethics, and highlighted the criticality of triangulated ethical appraisals of bystander phenomena, this section now argues that *phronimoi* (wise, good, flourishing people, living the morally good life)—as positioned within the virtue ethics tradition—embody the requisite personal values/qualities/attributes to exemplify, by their actions, the personification of the ‘good’ bystander. Broadly construed, virtue ethics is a branch of ethics focused on issues of character, excellence and human flourishing. Historically, the term refers to an approach in normative ethics which stresses the centrality of virtues or moral character, as opposed to formulaic, rules-based approaches found in other ethical theories such as deontology, contractarianism, or utilitarianism [59]. Divergences between theories, such as those outlined above, are best explained by way of an example:

Rory, an office worker, is regularly berated and humiliated publicly by his manager. While most of his colleagues remain silent, two new colleagues intervene and report the manager to HR, agreeing also to testify on his behalf at any subsequent investigation. In such cases, a deontologist will maintain that, in doing so, the two colleagues are acting in accordance with a moral precept or rule, such as ‘Love thy neighbour’ or ‘Do unto others’. A utilitarian, on the other hand, will consider the consequences of intervening as having the effect of maximizing the potential for positive outcomes for all concerned—not just for Rory, but his family and other colleagues also. In contrast, however, a virtue ethicist will emphasize the fact that helping/protecting Rory would be charitable or benevolent—two virtues we would expect to find in a ‘good’ person.

The virtue ethicist champions a neo-Aristotelian *phronimos*, a practically wise person, a virtuous person, a good person, one who lives a morally good life (NE 1094a23–25), someone who, systematically and successfully, *does the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, to the right extent, for the right reasons* [53,60–65]. Practically wise people (*phronimoi*) are expert at deliberating towards the end of living well, (NE 1140a28), and doing well, *eupraxia* (NE 1140b7) [66]. Such individuals, armed with virtue-tempered motivations in

conjunction with virtue-regulated emotions, consistently execute exemplary judgements in the practical domain. In this way, *phronimoi* get things right in both action and feeling [65]. As exemplars of practical wisdom, they seek a larger good than just one's own and concern themselves with the well-being and flourishing of others [67].

Reflecting the importance of fostering and protecting a positive organisational culture, bearing witness to *phronimoi* being virtuous and flourishing motivates others to seek out and practise these virtues in order to flourish too. Indeed, in terms of self-benefitting and other-benefitting virtues, the self/other symmetric notion of what it is to *be* virtuous *assumes* that the embodiment of the virtues, and the living of a morally good life will, on account of the interrelatedness and interdependence of existence, bestow righteousness (almost by osmosis) upon others who are endeavouring to be virtuous and flourish [68]. Being good and doing right by others is thus either caught, taught, or some combination of both [69]. Close proximity to the virtuous motivations, prudent actions, and flourishing of *phronimoi* understandably encourages others to aspire to emulate such exemplary characters and their behaviours [69,70].

6. Discussion

It is naïve to conceptualise the bystander as the docile constituent of a homogenous group. Bystanders are not members of a cult-like collective, with identical values, aspirations and, critically, an equal ability to exercise power. Research indicates that bystanders (re)act to witnessing bullying in different ways, based on a variety of contextual factors. We have conceptualised these responses as follows, *inertia* (do nothing) [71,72], *intervention* (directly intervene) [28,73] and *involvement* (participate in the bullying) [74]. An ethicist will ask “How *should* they respond” and “Why?”.

This paper champions the revelatory value of interdisciplinary research into workplace bullying and advocates for the conceptual insights which philosophy exposes, particularly when employed synergistically with the more traditional research disciplines engaged in the scholarship of work-related incivility. Applying a virtue ethics approach to understanding bystander behaviours is helpful for two key reasons. Firstly, most human beings aspire towards *eudaimonia*—to be morally good and just, to be successful at living life well, to flourish. *Phronimoi*—that is, persons who embody characterological excellence—demonstrate a type of symbiotic fusion between ethical virtues (*álogoi*), and intellectual excellences (*nous/diánoia*) (p. 211) [48]. As such, the deeply embedded character traits of the wise person (*phronimos*) are unsusceptible to the allure of personal gain, diffusion of responsibility or audience inhibition—three contextual factors which often result in well-meaning people doing the wrong thing. If you are a *phronimos*, you systematically choose the right thing to do (means and end), time and time again. Having *eithike arete* (excellence in character) renders you impervious to vice-worthy contextual factors, many of which make otherwise good people do bad things. Virtue (*aretai*) protects you from things that do not matter in terms of *eudaimonia* (flourishing; living a morally good life; living and acting successfully) [48,53].

For a bystander to workplace bullying or harassment to be considered *phronimoi*, they would intuitively know the right thing to do (intervene to protect the target) and will do so because they have no fear of personal repercussion. Indeed, they will consider it their moral duty to intervene in the toxic incivility to protect the target, a decision that is impervious to any suggestion of peer pressure. Moreover, emulating virtuous behaviour, making that which is implicit in the *phronimos* explicit, illustrates a constructive means of showing how virtue can both be caught and taught [75]. Those with moral or epistemic vices can learn to overcome them; those with morally questionable motivations or behaviours can be shown alternatives to such toxic and harmful behaviours [76,77]. This suggests that, by intervening to protect the target, the bystander is affecting the nature of the immediate organisational culture, emboldening and inspiring others to behave in a just manner as well as to abhor incivility and victimisation. In other words, the public exemplification/manifestation of a deeply embedded, ethical code of morally excellent values encourages others to *be* ‘good’

and to act in a just and virtuous manner. Critically, if virtue can be both caught and taught, there are obvious implications for the role of training and education in addressing workplace bullying and promoting positive organisational cultures at work [27].

Second, *phronimoi* embody the skills of wise judgement. They correctly grasp the particularities embedded in complex situations, because “they have an eye, formed from experience, that enables them to see correctly” (1143b11–13) [65]. Excellence in character, precise perception, insight, correct reasoning, and wise judgement, habitually executed with an eye on living a morally good life, mark *phronimoi* as the type of person who excel in leadership roles, teaching, social work, etc. [66]. As particularists, they do not seek, nor indeed believe in, the quest to codify human behaviour and thereby reduce potentially harmful exchanges to predetermined positivistic monocausal effects. Instead, they intuitively understand the *grand narrative* and acknowledge the subjective reality of each individual’s life, i.e., their context-specific, embedded condition. They recognise which rules, if any, to follow in order to reach a wise and just outcome. For *phronimoi* bystanders, this means that they do not require a policy or a law to ensure their good actions—they have virtue-directed understandings of their obligations to act in a just and ethical manner, to protect, even if that means to act contrary to the dominant culture of the organisation. They will intervene when a colleague is attacked by, for example, a manager, because they are virtuous, act in accordance with what is good or bad for a person, and have “wise judgement”. Their actions are inspired/determined by means of objectively good reasoning, i.e., their colleague is suffering and therefore the *just thing to do* is to alleviate this unnecessary suffering. This is why the *phronimos* does not succumb to inertia. They intervene in the right way.

A deep understanding of context and the irreducibly complex particularities of situations equip them to do the right thing, for the right reasons, to the right extent, at the right time. Their reasoning and judgment are at all times based upon a clear, textured understanding of context and their judgement may be understood as an ability to recognize the atypicality of cases and “situations where no immediately apparent application of procrustean rules will suffice” (p. 223) [78]. For this reason, the *phronimos* takes the enmeshed agent in his/her irreducibly context-rich situation and forms a defensible evaluative judgment about what they might do, where right action is calculated in the context of the *best* action an agent can perform under the given circumstances. This evaluative process demands insightful sensitivity; it requires patience and understanding (*sunesis*); reflective dialectical experience, exemplary character; virtue (intellectual and ethical); fluency; a deep sensitivity to context; openness; courage, practical reasoning and wisdom, first-personal/third-personal reasons-attunement, agent-empathy, and perseverance [79].

Returning to the triptic of intervention, involvement and inertia, a good person will intervene when they witness a colleague being attacked or humiliated. The nature of this intervention is context based and may occupy a space on a responsive continuum from offering moral support to directly/physically confronting the perpetrator. As [80] remarks, “the sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil” (p. 80), an argument which may be applied, in particular, to bystanders who succumb to *inertia* when witnessing bullying or harassment. The harms which result from those who *involve* themselves in bystander behaviours are likewise pernicious and can have far-reaching consequences. Therefore, as human beings, “we must prevent wrongdoing because the world in which we all live, wrong-doer, wrong sufferer and spectator, is at stake” (p. 182) [80]. In the context of organisational culture, good people (who do good things for the right reasons), regardless of their position within any structural hierarchy, will serve as a reminder that moral self-improvement is always desirable and a possibility [81].

While virtue ethics has been criticised by experimental philosophers, some of which directly challenge the very existence of virtue [82], as well as those who argue that context has a more extensive influence on (re)actions than virtue alone [83], there is still compelling evidence to support the determining role of high-fidelity, global traits, all of which are consistently and reliably manifested in a wide variety of eliciting conditions [76,84]. Con-

sequently, this paper argues that philosophy, as a discipline, and specifically *Virtue Ethics* as a philosophically robust conceptual lens, facilitates the interdisciplinary appraisal of bystander behaviours/motivations from a nuanced and edifying perspective. In so doing, new insights are exposed, taken-for-granted assumptions destabilised and, critically, our understanding of bystander behaviours is augmented.

While the authors are more than a little reluctant to disagree with the Irish Nobel Laureate whose quote at the start of this paper maintains that *innocence* and *bystanders* are anathema to each other, we would respectfully argue that the reality is far more complex. Indeed, we suggest that such is the complexity of the inter/intrapersonal dynamics of bystander actions, a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches are required if scholarship is to facilitate the development of a new, enriched and integrated epistemology—one which acknowledges the ethical paradoxes and contradictory discourses at the heart of agent-specific bystander impulses and rationalisation.

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