

Chauvin Conviction About Accountability, Commentators Say

The Wired Word for the Week of May 2, 2021

In the News

After the April 20 conviction of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, several commentators and others have said the trial and the verdict were about accountability, preferring that word to "justice."

For example, in an opinion piece in *University Press*, a publication of Florida Atlantic University, staff writer Michael Gennaro wrote "'Justice' was a word used a lot in the wake of the verdict. I think 'accountability' fits better here. Justice would be George Floyd still being alive."

On May 25, 2020, Chauvin, along with three other police officers, responded to a complaint that Floyd had passed a \$20 counterfeit bill. They took Floyd, who was apparently under the influence of a chemical substance (later found to be fentanyl and methamphetamine) into custody. Floyd initially resisted but eventually ceased to do so. Nonetheless, he was restrained in a neck hold under Chauvin's knees for about nine minutes. And all this while Floyd was handcuffed, lying face down on the street and calling out "I can't breathe."

Eventually, Floyd suffered an anoxic seizure. Chauvin, however, persisted in the back-and-neck restraint he'd been applying to Floyd for an additional four minutes, even after Floyd had no pulse and was not breathing.

In the trial, Chauvin was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter. His sentencing won't be until June, but some legal experts say it's likely he will receive a 30-year prison sentence.

Chauvin is white and Floyd was black. The prosecution in the trial did not say or intimate that Chauvin was a racist; nor did they suggest that racism played any role in his crimes. They did, however, say that he was a bad cop. Some Americans, speaking from their own experiences, say that racism was a factor.

Hoppy Kercheval, a well-known broadcaster for West Virginia Radio Corporation, also commented in *MetroNews* about accountability in Chauvin's case.

"Accountability is an important concept, especially for individuals in positions of responsibility, and few professions in our society bear a greater responsibility than police officers. They maintain 'the thin blue line' that separates order from chaos," Kercheval said.

But, said Kercheval, police officers have "an obligation to stay within the boundaries of the law themselves." While he maintained that police officers "must have the benefit of the doubt, especially when making split-second life or death decisions," they must also show restraint.

"When a police officer crosses that line, as Chauvin did, there must be accountability, and that strengthens trust, which is vitally important in policing," Kercheval said, and he added that "one reasonable conclusion from the Chauvin trial is not that 'all cops are bad,' but rather when a cop fails in his responsibility, they will be held accountable."

To find out how this focus on police accountability might translate into specifics, *CBS News* spoke with activists and legal experts to learn how Chauvin's conviction could change policing in America. Among the responses CBS received are these:

- The verdict could drive both state and federal policy. CBS noted that the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which passed in the House last month, "uses Floyd's legacy as a case to make specific changes to key police policies, including banning chokeholds and no-knock warrants, ending qualified immunity for officers and making it easier for police to be held accountable for abuses." The Senate is expected to take up the bill soon.
- The verdict may give prosecutors a sense of confidence when bringing future cases against police.

- Chauvin's trial could pave the way for police to testify against fellow officers in future cases, as happened in the Chauvin trial.

Whatever happens in the future, many people hope that the Chauvin verdict will be a crucial juncture in the national conversation about race, policing, public safety, the use of force and accountability by all.

Applying the News Story

The word "accountable" -- in its meaning as "Liable to be called ... to answer for responsibilities and conduct" -- has been in use in the English language since at least 1583, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Before that, accountable has roots in the Middle English (A.D. 1150-1450) word *account*, and before that, roots in the Old French (possibly as early as the A.D. 700s) *aconter*, according to *Origins: The Encyclopedia of Words*. And all that time, from one language to another, with essentially the same meaning: taking responsibility for one's actions.

The first use of the idea of accountability in the Bible is in Genesis 3, where God confronts Adam and Eve for eating forbidden fruit. The word "accountable" isn't there, but there's no question that our first parents had done what God had told them they must not do, and now were being called to answer for their conduct. And with their failure to be accountable, came a huge penalty: expulsion from the garden.

Our point with this etymological excavation is to note that almost from the beginning of creation, humankind has recognized that no one is a law unto him- or herself. Accountability to our Creator and to others is part of what it means to live as God wants us to. Thus accountability is our topic in this discussion.

To help our discussion, here two definitions from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*:

- **justice**: the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments ... the administration of law
- **accountability**: the quality or state of being accountable, especially: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions

The Big Questions

1. What do you see as the primary similarities between justice and accountability? What are the primary differences?
2. To what persons do you regard yourself as legitimately accountable? Why? To what entities do you regard yourself as legitimately accountable? Why?
3. In what ways do you help others to be accountable? How is it possible to do so without judging others, and what does that suggest about the difference between justice and accountability?
4. Is it fair and right that higher standards of integrity and behavior are expected from some professions than from others? Explain your answer. What are the compensations for being held to a higher standard? What, if any, standards should be expected of every profession or job?
5. Is it possible to hold someone accountable while also extending forgiveness? How can we do that? How does God hold us accountable for our misdeeds while also extending mercy to us? Are some sins unforgivable?