My Brother, the Unabomber

An Interview with David Kaczynski

In 1996, a social worker named David Kaczynski collaborated with the Federal Bureau of Investigation to apprehend his brother, Theodore Kaczynski, whom David had come to suspect of being the Unabomber, responsible for a seventeen-year campaign of mail bombings that killed three people and injured a dozen others. David campaigned vigorously to prevent his brother from facing the death penalty, and, as a result of a 1998 plea agreement, Theodore received a life sentence. David has since become an activist against capital punishment. Since 2001, he has served as the executive director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty. In April 2005, the New York State legislature voted to end the death penalty in New York.

—Austin Dacey, *FI* Associate Editor

Free Inquiry: How did you decide to turn your brother in?

David Kaczynski: When you begin to think about the consequences of your actions, you realize quickly that the future is pretty unpredictable. And so you have to make decisions that anticipate the unknown.

FI: What ethical principles or core values guided your evaluation of consequences?

Kaczynski: I think violence should be the absolute last resort. The possibility that my brother might get the death penalty collided with that core ethical principle. On the other hand, my brother was—of course we didn't know for sure—might have been practicing violence. So I felt a responsibility to do something. The easy distinction we make between doing something and doing nothing doesn't always hold up when the consequences of action and nonaction might be the same.

FI: Is the Golden Rule a sound ethical principle?

Kaczynski: I think it is. One thing it glosses over is that no two human situations are identical, and no two human beings are identical. It's a roundabout way of describing how empathy works.

FI: Speaking of what others would have done unto them, your brother, Ted, has written, "I would unhesitatingly choose death over incarceration."

> "Conscience is a way of thinking about relationships and the responsibilities entailed by those relationships."
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> —*David Kaczynski*

Kaczynski: Yes, which raises the question of whether people know what is good for them. To what extent is one allowed to make judgments about what is or is not good for another? But a judgment affecting one person may also affect many others. Perhaps we're starting in the wrong place if we think of human beings in isolation from one another.

FI: In reaching your decision, you sought the counsel of your wife, Linda Patrik, who is a philosophy professor. I gather she's not a Kantian?

Kaczynski: Kant of course approved of the death penalty, and in fact said we would be morally remiss if we didn't carry it out.

FI: He was also a big fan of the moral distinction between doing and allowing.

Kaczynski: Our relationship played into this. Often we think of conscience as invested solely in the individual. You can make a counterargument that, while it does have this strong subjective property, it's also a feature of relationships. Conscience is a way of thinking about relationships and the responsibilities entailed by those relationships. Linda has a background in phenomenology and Buddhist ethics. These were tremendous resources as we wrestled with our situation.

FI: Many see conscience in a religious context. I know your parents attended an Ethical Culture society in Chicago where you sometimes accompanied them.

Kaczynski: I was raised in a humanist tradition. A very strong set of values that I received from my parents include the dignity and value of the human individual. They were very powerfully influenced by the tradition of Enlightenment reason and humanism.

FI: Why do so many Americans favor capital punishment?

Kaczynski: What people really think about the death penalty is unknown until people really *think* about the death penalty. The more people reflect on it, the less likely they will be to support it.

Here is a very simplistic explanation: people support it out of fear. First, there is the practical fear of crime affecting their lives very personally. Horrible crimes also cause people to reflect upon the causes of the crimes, human nature, and, ultimately, upon themselves. The death penalty functions as a form of denial. Saying that someone ought to be killed is another way of saying these questions ought to be removed to a place where they no longer have to think about them.

FI: What is one question you'd like answered?

Kaczynski: What happened to my brother? fi