

499

Responsibility

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The notion of responsibility is vexed, both conceptually and metaphysically. It is invoked in a bewildering variety of contexts, and in many of those contexts its very possibility is questioned. Ordinary language is not of much help: people can *be* responsible, *become* responsible, and be *held* responsible; they can *have* responsibilities, *claim* responsibility, *take* responsibility – and the list of verbs goes on. Our “modern scientific worldview” is often thought to undermine responsibility, yet we regret that politicians and teenagers don’t take it more seriously. It is, like most philosophically interesting concepts, remarkably easy to use but dreadfully difficult to understand. In this essay, I offer what little help I can.

Distinguishing Varieties of Responsibility

Let’s begin by distinguishing four varieties of responsibility – or, if you like, four senses of the word “responsibility” and its cognates (for helpful discussion, see Hart 1968).

First, we often speak in the plural of *responsibilities*, such as those associated with being President of the United States or those that come along with becoming a parent. For example, one of my responsibilities as a new father is to help care for my child; it is a duty, or an obligation, that I have acquired in virtue of a particular role or relationship (*see* DUTY AND OBLIGATION). This sense of the word is often referred to as *role responsibility*. Certain responsibilities (or duties) attach to my role as a parent; others attach to my role as a professor; still others, perhaps, to my role as a citizen of the United States.

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2 RESPONSIBILITY

A second sense of the word “responsible” is invoked when we search for causal explanations. For example, we might wonder what precise meteorological phenomena are responsible for the humid summer weather. What we are wondering about, in this case, is what meteorological phenomena *cause* the humidity. Accordingly, this sense of the word is often referred to as *causal responsibility*. When humans are involved in the explanation of an event, however, it is easy to conflate mere causal responsibility with the last two varieties: *legal* and *moral*.

Suppose that while I’m at your house for a party, I knock over an expensive vase and it shatters on the ground. The vase shattered because it hit the ground, and it hit the ground because I knocked it over, so it looks like I figure prominently into the causal explanation of the broken vase. I am, in the sense spelled out above, causally responsible for the broken vase. But when you come back from the kitchen and ask angrily, “Who’s responsible for this?,” you’re likely not simply interested in a causal explanation. You also want to know whose *fault* it is, so that you can know whom you should blame (*see* BLAME) and perhaps from whom you should request or demand compensation.

Determining fault, assigning blame, and demanding compensation are all activities that take us beyond questions of causal responsibility and, depending on the details of the case, into the realm of legal or moral responsibility. Suppose, for example, that I intentionally and maliciously bumped into the vase. In that case, a court might rule that I am on the hook for various legal sanctions, including being forced to pay you back and perhaps whatever penalties are associated with willful destruction of private property. In making such a ruling, the court would be deciding that I am *legally responsible* for the broken vase. You might also decide that it would be appropriate for you and the other guests at the party to get angry, to resent or rebuke me for what I did. In so doing, you would be judging that I am *morally responsible* for breaking the vase, and perhaps you would also be *holding me responsible* for breaking it.

These four varieties of responsibility – role, causal, legal, and moral – are connected in various ways. Neglecting my role responsibilities, for example, may well render me responsible in any or all of the other three senses for the results of such neglect, thereby perhaps giving rise to further role responsibilities. Or, to take another example, showing that I wasn’t, after all, causally responsible for a negative outcome may well get me off the legal and moral hook. But perhaps the deepest connection is that each variety of responsibility is, at least in some sense, concerned with *attribution* or *assignment*. To have a role responsibility is to have some particular action assigned to you; to be causally responsible for something is to have it attributed to the movements of your body; to be legally responsible for something is to have it assigned to you as something that the state can force you to remedy; to be morally responsible for something is to have it attributed to the workings of the psychological mechanisms that make you a moral agent in the first place (*see* MORAL AGENCY). Whatever it is, it’s *your* job, *your* doing, *your* liability, *your* fault.

Though each of these varieties is philosophically interesting, in what follows I will focus exclusively on moral responsibility. Readers interested in hearing more about

the other varieties are invited to follow the various cross-references listed at the end of this essay.

Why Moral Responsibility Matters

What makes moral responsibility so philosophically interesting is, in part, the versatility of the term. Under the general rubric of moral responsibility, ethicists and philosophers of law wonder about the nature of praise and blame, the justifiability of sanctions, the conceptual and legal difficulties presented by psychopathy (*see* PSYCHOPATHY), the precise meaning of desert (*see* DESERT), the nature and function of forgiveness (*see* FORGIVENESS), and the centrality of the moral sentiments to our interpersonal lives (*see* SENTIMENTS, MORAL), among much else. And metaphysicians investigate free will (*see* FREE WILL) – and the related topics of dispositions, abilities, time, and personal identity – in large part because of its alleged connection to (some aspect or other of) moral responsibility.

But moral responsibility is attractive to philosophers for an even deeper reason: its centrality to our lives as human beings. For better or worse, we take ourselves to be distinctive among animals, and one candidate for what sets us apart is our ability to make the sorts of choices for which we can be morally responsible. Again, for better or worse, we seem unable to resist seeing ourselves and our fellow humans as appropriate targets of praise and blame, gratitude and resentment, reward and punishment. This outlook would be wrongheaded – or perhaps even impossible – if not for the existence of moral responsibility. In short: moral responsibility seems to be an essential component of life as we know it. To understand ourselves fully, then, we must understand moral responsibility.

One of the main obstacles to understanding moral responsibility, however, is that it seems to mean something slightly different to everyone. For one thing, there is disagreement about what, precisely, it means to say that someone is morally responsible (both in general and for some particular action or outcome). But there is also disagreement and confusion (perhaps as a consequence of the first problem) about the precise relationship between moral responsibility, on the one hand, and the notions of blameworthiness, answerability, accountability, attributability, desert, and punishment (*see* PUNISHMENT), on the other. Let me say a bit about each of these problems.

The Concept of Moral Responsibility

The most popular view of what it means to say that someone is morally responsible is derived from P. F. Strawson's (1962) remarkably influential paper "Freedom and Resentment," so a brief discussion of Strawson's paper will prove fruitful (*see* STRAWSON, P. F.). It is a landmark work of philosophy for many reasons, but two are most relevant for our purposes. First, it sparked a renewed appreciation and respect for "what it is actually like to be involved in ordinary interpersonal relationships" (Strawson 2003: 77), which can only be understood by "attending to that complicated

4 RESPONSIBILITY

web of attitudes and feelings which form an essential part of the moral life as we know it" (Strawson 2003: 91), namely the *reactive attitudes* (see ATTITUDES, REACTIVE), which include "gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings" (Strawson 2003: 75). Second, Strawson's essay urges us to see moral responsibility as *constituted* by our actual practices of holding one another responsible – responding to ill-will with resentment and indignation, for example – rather than seeing our practices as constrained by independent metaphysical facts about the agent in question.

Each of these contributions was meant to combat what Strawson saw as two competing but equally pernicious attempts among his contemporaries to "overintellectualize the facts" (Strawson 2003: 91). On the one hand, there were those – Strawson called them the *optimists* – who argued that to be morally responsible is simply to be the sort of being who can be effectively influenced by punishment and condemnation. If punishing someone would succeed in "regulating behavior in socially desirable ways" (Strawson 2003: 89), then that person counts as morally responsible; if not, then not. The beauty of this view about the nature of moral responsibility is that it provides a quick and easy response to millennia of worry about whether moral responsibility is compatible with determinism (the view that the past and the laws of nature determine a unique future): even if determinism were true, some people would clearly be susceptible to influence by punishment, and hence determinism poses no threat at all to moral responsibility. The problem with the view, however, is that "it loses sight (perhaps wishes to lose sight) of the human attitudes of which these practices are, in part, the expression" (Strawson 2003: 92). It is "a characteristically incomplete empiricism, a one-eyed utilitarianism" (Strawson 2003: 92), and it ignores the *human* element of moral responsibility that Strawson sought to recapture by focusing on the reactive attitudes.

On the other hand, there were those who recognized that our practices of punishment expressed more than the mere desire to regulate behavior, but who argued that, therefore, "the man who is the subject of justified punishment, blame or moral condemnation must really *deserve* it" (Strawson 2003: 74) in a sense that implies the existence of a robust sort of free will that couldn't be had in a deterministic universe. This theorist – Strawson calls him the *pessimist* – sees the justifiability of our practices of punishment and blame as being constrained by some independent metaphysical facts about the agent himself, namely whether he acted with "contra causal freedom" (Strawson 2003: 92) or some other relevant, but difficult-to-articulate, capacity. This view certainly avoids the charge of inhumanity that was leveled against the one-eyed utilitarian, but Strawson finds it equally problematic because it represents a mysterious and hasty appeal to "obscure and panicky metaphysics" (Strawson 2003: 93) that, it turns out, is completely unnecessary. The optimist (from above) was wrong to ignore the reactive attitudes, but he was right to try to ground moral responsibility in our practices rather than in obscure metaphysical facts about free will. Accordingly – and here's the second contribution I mentioned above – Strawson argues that we ought to construe moral responsibility as being constituted by the emotionally laden and firmly entrenched framework provided by the reactive attitudes.

So, we have now seen three competing views about what it means to say that someone is morally responsible. According to the *utilitarian* view (Strawson's optimists), to be morally responsible is simply to be the sort of being who can be effectively influenced by punishment and condemnation. According to what we might call the *metaphysical* view (Strawson's pessimists), to be morally responsible is to possess some sort of robust capacity in virtue of which punishment and condemnation are deserved. According to Strawson, to be morally responsible is to be on the receiving end of those deeply human attitudes and feelings – the reactive attitudes – that express the community's general demand for goodwill. From the reactive attitudes alone, Strawson argues, we can capture “a sense of what we mean, i.e., of *all* we mean, when, speaking the language of morals, we speak of desert, responsibility, guilt, condemnation, and justice” (Strawson 2003: 91). An understanding of human nature is essential, but obscure metaphysics is not.

I said above that the most popular answer to the question of what it means to say that someone is morally responsible is *derived* from Strawson, but it isn't Strawson's. Although there is disagreement about how exactly to interpret Strawson's essay (for a helpful way into the debate, see McKenna and Russell 2008), most contemporary philosophers seem to think that he conflates *being* morally responsible with *being held* morally responsible, notions that ought to be kept apart. It is one thing for the moral community to *treat someone as if* she is morally responsible – by, say, targeting her with the reactive attitudes – but it is quite another for it to be *appropriate* for the moral community to do so, and Strawson, at least at first glance, appears to gloss over this distinction. (Or, perhaps better, he sees no use for it, since he sees the notion of appropriateness as a “pitiful intellectualist trinket for a philosopher to wear as a charm against the recognition of his own humanity” [Strawson 2003: 92].)

If we take this distinction seriously, then we arrive at the most prominent contemporary answer to the question of what it means to say that someone is morally responsible, what we might call *Strawsonianism*: to be morally responsible is to be an *apt* or *appropriate* target of the reactive attitudes. (Two prominent examples of this view are Wallace 1994; Fischer and Ravizza 1998.) This amendment, in a sense, makes Strawsonianism a revised version of the *metaphysical* view articulated above, since what makes the reactive attitudes appropriate will be some independent metaphysical facts about the agent. Crucially, however, the Strawsonian maintains (as he must, if he is to avoid a vicious circularity) that *the agent's being morally responsible* is not among the independent facts that render the reactive attitudes appropriate. Rather, the fact (if it is a fact) that the agent is morally responsible just *is* the fact that the reactive attitudes are appropriate. The capacities that are required for moral responsibility, then, are discovered by examining the norms that govern our reactive attitudes, and those norms do not themselves involve reference to any alleged independent fact about moral responsibility.

Strawsonianism is perhaps the most common view of the nature of moral responsibility, but it is not the only one. There is also the *ledger view*, which says that to be morally responsible is to be “such that there are ‘credits’ or ‘debits’ in one's ‘personal ledger,’ so that one is worthy of being judged to have such credits or debits”

(Zimmerman 1988: 7–8). This is a metaphorical statement of the view, of course, but the central point is that the facts about whether someone is morally responsible are determined wholly by facts about the agent and not at all by reference to the norms that govern our practices of blame and punishment (as in the Strawsonian view). It is, then, a *metaphysical* view of moral responsibility in the sense that Strawson’s pessimist’s view is metaphysical: it construes responsibility as a metaphysical fact about the agent that is independent of our practices.

One last view to mention is the *accountability view* (Oshana 1997), which lies somewhere between Strawsonianism and the ledger view. According to this view, to be morally responsible is to be the sort of person who ought to account for her behavior by explaining her intentions and beliefs in acting (or, perhaps, to be the sort of person who does things for which it is fitting that she give an account). This is not quite the Strawsonian view because it makes no essential reference to the norms that govern the reactive attitudes; indeed, according to this view, the reactive attitudes are appropriate only if the agent is accountable in this more basic sense. But it is also not quite the ledger view because it has a social dimension: the sort of facts that constitute moral responsibility are facts about when explanations ought to be offered.

For better or worse, alternatives to Strawsonianism remain under-explored. Fortunately, although I will sometimes take elements of the Strawsonian view for granted in what follows, I don’t think it is essential to any of the issues and problems that remain to be discussed.

The Many Faces of Moral Responsibility

We have just explored the disagreement about what, precisely, it means to say that someone is morally responsible, but the other (related) obstacle to a solid understanding of moral responsibility is disagreement and confusion about the precise relationship between moral responsibility, on the one hand, and the notions of blameworthiness, answerability, accountability, attributability, desert, and punishment, on the other.

I suggested above that the varieties of responsibility are perhaps unified by a concern with attribution or assignment, and this certainly seems to be part of what is at issue in discussions of moral responsibility: after all, if some action can’t properly be attributed to you, then it looks like it will be inappropriate to resent you for it, or judge that it has resulted in a debit from your moral ledger, or expect you to explain yourself. On the other hand, even if some unsavory action *can* properly be attributed to you, that doesn’t by itself mean that it *will* be appropriate to resent you for it. Attributability, while relevant to the propriety of the reactive attitudes, is nevertheless a distinct concern. A closer look reveals many more aspects of moral responsibility that are worth distinguishing.

The credit for drawing attention to the different “faces” of moral responsibility goes to Gary Watson (2004a), who distinguishes between an *attributability* face and an *accountability* face. Perhaps the best way to grasp the distinction is to consider

Watson's example of "the vicious criminal who is himself a victim of an abusive childhood" (Watson 2004a: 280; see also Watson 1987). Watson notes that we tend to feel ambivalent toward such a criminal: on the one hand, he is "malicious and cruel in a sense that no nonreflective being could be" and his conduct "expresses and constitutes his practical identity, what he stands for, what he has made of his life as he found it" (Watson 2004a: 281); on the other hand, we are drawn toward pity rather than blame by "the thought that the individual has already suffered too much and that we too would probably have been morally ruined by such a childhood" (Watson 2004a: 281). Watson explains this ambivalence by invoking the distinction between attributability and accountability.

One thing our concept of moral responsibility does is provide a way to distinguish between creatures who have a "practical identity" – a capacity to evaluate and adopt ends and act in ways that express those evaluative commitments – and those who do not. Many nonhuman animals may be responsible in the *causal* sense for certain happenings, but they cannot be responsible in the sense that those happenings are attributable to them in a way that opens them up to *aretaic* appraisals – assessments that concern "the agent's excellences and faults – or virtues and vices – as manifested in thought and action" (Watson 2004a: 266). Actions that express "what one is about" (Watson 2004a: 270) or where one stands on fundamental matters of evaluation are actions for which one is *answerable*, and hence – in a sense – responsible. The vicious criminal is not an animal; his actions do, despite his horrific childhood, reflect his evaluative commitments, and thus are attributable to him in the relevant sense (*see* AUTONOMY).

Nevertheless, we may think his abusive childhood colors his crime in a way that calls for pity rather than blame. According to Watson, this reflects a concern about whether the criminal is morally responsible in the sense of *accountability*: whether he really deserves to be subjected to the reactive attitudes, sanctions, or punishment (where these involve an expression of condemnation that would be absent from, say, locking him up merely to protect ourselves). This is an equally legitimate way of talking about moral responsibility, but it is distinct from responsibility understood as attributability, which seems more about "the relation of an individual to her behavior" rather than the "social setting in which we demand (require) certain conduct from one another and respond adversely to one another's failures to comply with these demands" (Watson 2004a: 262).

But how does this all relate to the discussion about different ways to cash out the concept of moral responsibility? It's hard to say, actually, since there has been too little clarity about this issue in the literature. However, I can offer some thoughts of my own.

Recall the formula that I identified above as Strawsonianism: to be morally responsible is to be an *apt* or *appropriate* target of the reactive attitudes. Is this a statement about attributability or accountability? I suspect that the answer to this question depends on how we understand the Strawsonian formula. To name a few possibilities, do we mean: (1) it wouldn't be a category mistake to target one with the reactive attitudes, (2) it would be permissible to target one with the reactive attitudes,

(3) it would be wrong *not* to target one with the reactive attitudes, (4) it wouldn't be *unfair* to target one with the reactive attitudes, (5) one *deserves* to be targeted with the reactive attitudes, or perhaps (6) that there is in fact someone who is entitled to target one with the reactive attitudes?

If appropriateness is understood as “not a category mistake,” then I think it is plausible to interpret Strawsonianism as a view about attributability. After all, even though we are inclined to withhold blame and sanctions from the vicious criminal with an abusive childhood, the fact that his actions express his “fundamental evaluative orientation” seems to show that he is in general *the sort of creature who could* be (if circumstances were different) targeted with the reactive attitudes. He is, after all, importantly different from, say, a squirrel, and we might mark that difference by saying that it would at least be *sensible* (it would make sense, it wouldn't manifest a fundamental misunderstanding of the facts) to target him with the reactive attitudes, even if not justified in the actual circumstances. The other candidates for the meaning of “appropriate,” though, all seem to put Strawsonianism on the *accountability* side of Watson's distinction, though in importantly different ways.

Theories of Moral Responsibility

Once we focus on one particular aspect or face of moral responsibility, the next natural question to ask is the following: what capacities must a person possess in order to be morally responsible in that sense? (A Strawsonian way to put the question: which facts about the agent render him an (in)appropriate target of the reactive attitudes?) One widely accepted (but vague) answer (its broad contours trace back to Book III of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*) (see ARISTOTLE) is that the agent must have some sort of *control* over his actions (we're not responsible for muscle spasms) and some sort of *knowledge* of what he's doing (we're not responsible for the results of blameless ignorance). Most contemporary work consists in an attempt to understand the requirement of control. (Though Sher [2009] contains an important discussion of the epistemic component, and Scanlon [1998] develops a theory that de-emphasizes the importance of control.)

Perhaps the most notorious way to understand control is as *free will*, where free will in turn is understood as the ability to do otherwise (though that conception of free will is itself controversial). This understanding gives rise to the infamous Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP), which says that an agent is morally responsible for some action only if she could have done otherwise than perform it. There is much debate over the truth of this principle, in part because it plays a significant role in a powerful argument for the conclusion that no one is ever morally responsible for anything. Roughly, that argument begins with the claim that our best physics and neuroscience seem to show that human actions are determined by relevant scientific laws, and then it proceeds by arguing that determinism is incompatible with the ability to do otherwise, and hence, via PAP, that our best physics and neuroscience seem to preclude moral responsibility (van Inwagen 1983). This is just one of the many ways that the reality of moral responsibility has come under attack;

I'll mention a few more below. For now, though, I'll simply note that PAP is highly controversial, and I'll point you to the essays in (McKenna and Widerker 2003) for the details.

Other prominent accounts of control take it to be a matter of *normative competence*. Given that the whole game of moral responsibility seems to involve the exchange of moral expectations and demands, you are only going to count as morally responsible if you are able to *play* that game, and what it takes to play the game is some sort of understanding of normative concepts and an ability to evaluate courses of action along a normative dimension (Watson 1987). Different theorists spell this out in different ways.

Fischer and Ravizza (1998), for example, argue that the control required for moral responsibility is to be understood in terms of receptivity to reasons (*see* REASONS) (the ability to recognize the reasons that there are) and reactivity to reasons (the ability to translate those reasons into action). Agents who lack either capacity are just not the sorts of creatures that we can reasonably expect to comply with moral demands, and hence it would seem inappropriate to target them with the reactive attitudes. Reflection on clear cases of nonresponsibility seems to support this view: someone who has been hypnotized into doing something unsavory would presumably do that thing no matter what reasons there were to refrain. The hypnotist has effectively removed his ability to weigh various reasons there may be for or against a course of action, and so his moral agency has been impaired in an important sense. This should lead us to judge that it would be inappropriate to blame him for what he does under the hypnotist's suggestion (*see* MANIPULATION). R. Jay Wallace (1994) and Gary Watson (2004b) also emphasize the importance of normative competence.

One last conception of control worth mentioning here comes from the work of Harry Frankfurt, which articulates a view according to which moral responsibility requires a capacity to reflect on our most basic desires and endorse some rather than others, thus "[creating] a self out of the raw materials of inner life" (Frankfurt 1988: 170). Actions that flow from just the right sort of volitional structure then count as truly our own, and we are thus morally responsible for them. Frankfurt's account, then, focuses less on normative understanding and instead emphasizes the importance of integrity and unity of will.

All of these theories have to deal, in one way or another, with various conceptual, metaphysical, and scientific threats to the reality of moral responsibility. Historically the most important threats to moral responsibility have been determinism and divine foreknowledge. In fact, much of the recent work on moral responsibility has been motivated by an attempt to grapple with the threat of determinism, so perhaps it is worth saying a bit more about it here.

Roughly, the thesis of determinism is the thesis that the past and the laws of nature together determine a unique future. It is particularly problematic for theorists of moral responsibility because, on the one hand, it must be either true or false, but on the other hand, moral responsibility seems precluded either way. I mentioned above one way in which the truth of determinism would threaten moral responsibility – via the Principle of Alternative Possibilities – but even if PAP is false, one might still

think that the truth of determinism would mean we aren't the sources of our actions in the way required for moral responsibility (Pereboom 2001). The falsity of determinism is also widely thought to be problematic for moral responsibility. After all, if my actions fail to be determined by the past (including my own mental states), then what I end up doing starts to look like it's merely a matter of luck, and hence not something for which I can be morally responsible (for discussion, see the introduction to Watson 2003).

The threat posed by determinism has given rise to the standard terminology that categorizes theorists of moral responsibility: *compatibilists* think that the truth of determinism is compatible with the existence of moral responsibility (Fischer and Ravizza 1998); *incompatibilists* disagree. Among incompatibilists, *libertarians* think that the falsity of determinism is compatible with the existence of moral responsibility (van Inwagen 1983); *skeptics* disagree and conclude instead that moral responsibility is impossible (Strawson 1994).

Aside from the issue of determinism, though, there are other threats that theorists of moral responsibility must face: recent research from social psychology, for example, has cast doubt on the existence of genuine normative competence, given how sensitive we unwittingly are to morally irrelevant features of our environment (Doris 2002). And there is also the persistent skeptical worry that the conditions of moral responsibility are in fact impossible to satisfy, since there seems to be tension among our relevant moral beliefs (see MORAL LUCK).

In short, our understanding of moral responsibility is still developing, and even as it does the legitimacy of its associated practices is being challenged from an ever-increasing number of threats. If we are to get to the heart of the matter, more work is needed.

SEE ALSO: ARISTOTLE; ATTITUDES, REACTIVE; AUTONOMY; BLAME; DESERT; DUTY AND OBLIGATION; FORGIVENESS; FREE WILL; MANIPULATION; MORAL AGENCY; MORAL LUCK; PUNISHMENT; PSYCHOPATHY; REASONS; SENTIMENTS, MORAL; STRAWSON, P. F.

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