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Responsibility: A Psychologist's Point of View

By RICHARD L. BLANTON*

Knowledge, Choice and Action

The word "responsibility" refers to the ability to accept the consequences of a choice, and a person is said to be "responsible" if he can be shown to have such an ability as a result of capacity and/or experience.

A person, in order to survive, must choose between alternatives for acting. Under certain circumstances he is required to accept the consequences of his choice and is held accountable to society for errors. Under other circumstances he is accountable only to himself. Society decides, on the basis of its own experience, for which choices its members must be held accountable. The subject matter of Law consists of descriptions of these choice situations as well as the prescribed alternatives which are to be punished or rewarded.

For many centuries, society has accepted and held to be valid assumption that a human act is either "free" or "compelled". The argument raised by Professor De Boer has been the subject of much discussion in the Law, Theology, the Humanities, the Social Sciences and Philosophy. It is asserted that if an act is determined by natural law, choice cannot exist; hence the person is not free but is compelled to act as he does and cannot be held responsible. Society's representatives in the law have sought for "tests" by which a person may be shown to have acted under "natural law", i.e. compulsion on the one hand or "free will" on the other. Such a search is not only fruitless, it is based on a misunderstanding of human freedom and natural law.

An act is a result of the capacity, knowledge and motivation of the acting person. Given no changes in these, an act could not

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have been different than it was. Freedom exists to the degree that a person is permitted to act in pursuit of his own values. He is held responsible for the effects that such acts may have on his society. That his actions are caused by factors of which he may be ignorant does not exempt him from punishment, for the purpose of punishment is to motivate him to learn. To the notion that causality implies compulsion it can be replied that science does not define cause in this sense. Causality refers to the regularity of observed events. The key word here is "observed". Causation is a matter of knowledge, not a matter of force. The idea that cause consists of the application of force is probably derived from our own experience of the mechanical aspects of our own body movements and has been supported by the eighteenth-century conviction that all natural phenomena can be reduced to the principles of classical mechanics. This belief is at variance with the principles of modern science.

On the other hand, the *experience* of choice is probably due to the inability of a person at the moment of action to know all the processes which lead to the act itself. The complex of values, needs and motives is projected against a world of external fact, and an act is a result of inadequate knowledge of ourselves as well as incomplete knowledge of the world. Where no knowledge exists, that is, where the alternatives appear equivalent because of lack of knowledge of the state of the world and the self, a response is made at random. We say that we "take a chance". In a sense, we can call this a completely free choice, but such a use of the term is paradoxical since the choice is not made in the usual sort of effort to bring about a correspondence between the external events and our own values and needs. The consequences of a random choice are "accidental" and the person is usually not held responsible for choices of this sort if he can be shown to have an acceptable motive for having made it.

In any case, freedom depends upon the *ability* to choose and hence cannot depend upon ignorance or chance. It must, therefore, depend upon knowledge. A man who must act without knowledge cannot predict or control the consequences of his actions and is, in this sense, a slave. It is for this reason that education is perhaps the most vital function in a democratic society.

Now there are two types of situations in which persons accept the consequences of acting without knowledge. The first of these includes a large number of the behaviors called "games". In gambling it is the rule that everyone must be ignorant to some specified degree. He may, for example, know anything except the order of the cards in the deck. In this case, possession of information is unethical. It is ruled that he must make a choice based on ignorance and assume the responsibility for it which is stipulated by the rules of the game. Games are interesting psychological phenomena, though not of primary concern to us here. It may be said, however, that many offenders against society, particularly juveniles, appear not to distinguish well between "real" and "game" situations. It is felt that one who is "playing" should not be punished for error.

The second situation in which persons accept the consequences of acting without knowledge is called a *learning situation*. Here, one acts in a state of ignorance in order to obtain information on which to base future choices. Responsibility for error is then accepted *only* as the price of knowledge, and society makes special exemptions on the basis of agreed upon rules in such cases. "Give the fellow a chance," we say, "he's got to learn." While it is commonly said that "Ignorance is no excuse," what we actually mean is that a person is held accountable *first* for failure to learn the patterns of behavior acceptable to society. This is his primary responsibility.

If, then, the ability to choose depends upon knowledge, responsibility also depends upon knowledge. The question of what knowledge depends upon is a psychological question and can be answered scientifically, although the detailed answer to this question will require many more years of study. Put very simply, knowledge depends upon the *capacity* to learn, the *opportunity* to learn, and the *need* to learn. All of these are interrelated in complex ways not now well understood. But let us examine them briefly and attempt to make a general statement of our problem in the light of this examination.

Society cannot provide *the capacity to learn*, it can only attempt to remedy or compensate for organic defects. For such conditions as deafness, blindness and epilepsy, the situation is very hopeful. For mental deficiency, we can do little except determine

the nature and extent of the deficit and plan for such compensations as appear feasible at present. The problem of insanity is an especially difficult one and there are many thorny issues. If mental illness is a kind of deficiency, i.e. an organic illness, we would be faced with the task of helping the patient to compensate for a lack of a capacity we cannot as yet identify. Many mental illnesses, however, are almost certainly due to distortion in the areas of need and opportunity to learn, and the prevention and cure of such mental illnesses must await further knowledge of these factors if it is to be effective.

The opportunity to learn, on the other hand, is a matter for which society has assumed primary responsibility. Its own continuation depends upon provision of such opportunity to all its members. Much of the responsibility is assigned to the family, since experience has shown that critical aspects of need-formation and information are best provided in the home. Other institutions have been established to supplement the work of the family. We know, however, that unless a person is permitted to meet situations leading to reward and punishment he cannot acquire the need and the knowledge to choose appropriately. When mental illness or delinquency result from poverty of experience they are opportunity problems. It is because of poverty of experience that we exempt children from responsibility for antisocial acts.

The need to learn is a condition of life itself and arises from the fundamental instability of living substances. Society requires that people learn to get along with each other, since otherwise it cannot survive. Since rewards and punishments follow social acts, getting along with others soon appears as a separate need which is founded on the basic physical needs but which soon becomes even stronger than some of the physical needs in the determination of everyday behavior. Systems of "manners", for example, lend consistency and predictability to social behavior and a measure of security to social interaction. Society can provide the need to learn the special skills and knowledge on which socially meaningful choices depend. It does this by rewarding and punishing the acts of its members. Social responsibility is therefore an outgrowth of appropriate reward and punishment.

Unfortunately, people have usually assumed that needs or motives are *sui generis*, that they arise outside the context of social

learning. It is said that we cannot take the responsibility for insuring that a person will love good and reject evil. This belief is not only demonstrably false, but in fact society has always placed the responsibility for such teaching on the family. Our problem is to discover in what respects the family may fail in this teaching and supplement it with other institutional facilities.

Learning, Reward, and Punishment

From the psychologist's point of view, the question is not "What is the person's responsibility for his acts?" He is always completely responsible to the extent that his behavior leads to socially relevant consequences. This does not mean, however, that society can make *a priori* decisions about the punishments or rewards which should follow any particular act. Society, too, makes a choice and hence has the responsibility to determine for each case what punishments or rewards will lead to acceptable behavior in the future. For many centuries social law has sought to achieve the inevitability of natural law. The greater its similarity to an implacable "Fate", the greater its power is thought to be. Yet we are all aware that punishment for punishment's sake is not only useless but harmful. If a punishment results in no change of behavior, then society is paying too high a price for useless educational methods. The pleasure of vengeance and the satisfaction of playing the role of "Fate" are not worth the cost.

In recent years, society and its legal agents have taken a different approach to the problem of mental illness. We have, indeed, gone so far in the opposite direction as to fail often to administer appropriate patterns of reward and punishment for accomplishing behavioral changes in such persons. In dealing with crime, however, we remain on the defensive. We reject vengeance as unchristian and lustful, as an act of weakness rather than strength. And we argue that punishment is a deterrent to crime, saying that crime can be prevented only if society interposes external obstacles in the path of the delinquent person. At the same time, we all know that behavior is finally determined by processes within the individual and that external forces can change behavior only if corresponding changes take place within the individual himself. We make the law an object of fear, and this probably results in greater conformity in some instances. But the purpose

is distorted by the misuse of the means. As Tagore says, "The clumsiness of power spoils the key and uses the pick-axe."

In short, unless a person lacks the capacity to learn, the problem of responsibility in mental disease cannot be separated from the problem of responsibility in general. Where mental illness is a result of failure to learn, our responsibility is to teach and to use any rewards and punishments necessary to accomplish that objective which our values stipulate. It has long been known that many mental patients acquire the motivation to recover from being deprived of their freedom and confined to a hospital. Is this, in every case, the most effective punishment? What others should we employ? Patients also improve as a result of the interest and concern shown by others for their welfare. Is this the most effective reward? What others should we employ? And what, given the utility of a reward or punishment, is the best means for administering it? We need research on these problems. We need to study the rewarding and punishing aspects of the hospital environment and their relationships to improvement of patient behavior. We need more fundamental information about the processes by which motives and habits are acquired and changed in real-life situations.

Mental patients and their relatives are usually gratified when the patient is labelled "sick" since this absolves them of guilt. This attitude does much harm to treatment programs, since by implication the person is also absolved of responsibility for further learning. Medical science has learned that even in physical illness, much of the responsibility for recovery must remain with the patient if he is to be restored to fully adequate functioning. The mental patient must accept the responsibility to learn as the price of healthy living.

Similarly, the criminal or delinquent person must accept the responsibility to learn as the price of social acceptance, and any rewards and punishments necessary to accomplish his habilitation should be sought out and employed. If, in a given case, imprisonment is likely to be effective, by all means let us imprison him. If love and care are likely to be most effective, let us use them. But let us never forget that a means and a purpose should be related by fact and not by feeling alone.

Insanity and crime are, as Maudsley has said, "Neither accidents nor anomalies in the universe, but come by law and testify to causality." If this is true, and if it is true that the principal purpose of society is to achieve maximum realization of the values it chooses to hold, then the problem of responsibility as historically posed is a pseudo-problem. The question is not whether a person should be exempted from punishment. The question is rather, "By what means can we teach him what he needs to know in order to behave acceptably?"

In summary, it seems to me that responsibility depends upon the ability to choose appropriately which in turn depends upon knowledge. Knowledge depends upon the need, the capacity and the opportunity to learn. Society, acting through the family and other institutions, has assumed the responsibility for providing these or correcting flaws in them. Our greatest need is for knowledge as to how to make this process more effective. The assertion that a person's acts are determined by his past or by his physical make-up is probably true. But this does not mean that he should not be punished for error. Such a person should be punished or rewarded to that extent and by those means which are necessary and sufficient to bring about acceptable and observable changes in his behavior through learning.

The law is conservative and not prone to experiment. This is wise, for the knowledge of the past is usually better than no knowledge at all. But governments should support the search for knowledge which will make their operations more effective, for a democratic society must be oriented to the future as well as to the past.

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