

# A PLURAL THEORY OF RESPONSIBILITY

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## Abstract

This chapter offers an outline for a plural theory of responsibility. Responsibility is what someone does and who someone is. One is responsible. You are responsible. One acts responsibly. Responsibility is ontological and phenomenological, and the actual content of what it means to be or to act responsibility varies considerably based on context. Responsibility is a form of activity, and as such our understanding of what being responsible means changes according to the different conditions we find ourselves needing to act. I offer five accounts. The first is about causality and liability and treats responsibility as a combination of agency and accountability. The second is how we are responsible because of our membership in various but specific communities. The third is what I term the political responsibility of identity. The fourth is ontological and frames responsibility as an ethical consequence of our being as opposed to our not-being. The fifth is political responsibility as political ethics.

## Introduction

Political responsibility is both a central feature in, and it is often absent from politics. What some might see as the height of irresponsibility others may view as being responsible. Evidence of this simultaneous presence and absence can be seen in the United Kingdom's debacle during and after the EU referendum with many on the Leave side promoting blatant falsehoods ([Baron 2018](#)), in Brazil with the election of Jair Bolsonaro, in Hungary under Viktor Orbán, in Israel with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with President Donald Trump in the United States, and the list goes on. However, no doubt others would contest this selection. Aren't these really illustrations of political irresponsibility? The answer will depend in part on the values we hold. There is no single measure by which we can identify what constitutes political responsibility, as doing so invokes values that are external to the idea of responsibility itself.

Responsibility is not something that someone has like rights, for example. Rather responsibility is what someone does and who someone is. One *is* responsible. You *are* responsible. One *acts* responsibly. Responsibility, as I approach it in this chapter, is ontological and phenomenological. Responsibility is a form of activity, and as such our understanding of what being responsible means changes according to the different conditions we find ourselves needing to act. This characteristic is one of its great strengths as a normative category: that responsibility can change while still remaining the same.

In the following, I develop an outline for a plural theory of responsibility. A plural theory is important because the very idea of responsibility is central to the functioning of any legitimate political order, but what responsibility means is often unclear. For example, the 2001 International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty ([International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty et al. 2001](#)) used responsibility as a signifier for legitimacy and as a critique of sovereignty. Responsibility as a normative concept tends to refer to something outside of itself that provides the reasons for what is or is not responsible. Adding further room for confusion is how the concept of responsibility is also often used in such a way that overlaps with other concepts such as duty and obligation.<sup>1</sup> This begs the question of what is unique about responsibility, or at least, what is special about it? Part of what makes responsibility unique is how in theorizing responsibility we reveal normative structures that characterize our being in the world.

In what follows, I offer a critique of the concept of political responsibility by building on this idea that responsibility functions as a signifier and that responsibility often means very different things in practice. In my outline of a plural theory I offer five accounts. The first is about causality and liability and treats responsibility as a combination of agency and accountability. The second account is the non-causal model we find in the works of Hannah Arendt, Iris Marion Young, and Jade Schiff. In this account we are responsible because of our membership in various but specific communities. Our belonging to these communities places a demand upon ourselves for being responsible for what is done “in our name” as members of a community, even though we do not directly cause that which we have some responsibility for.

The third account is the political responsibility of identity, is influenced by the works of Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor and William Connolly, and is based on our conditions of plurality and intersubjectivity. The Political responsibility of identity is a responsibility to the world of meaning in which we live in, and how who we are is always part of our belonging to a world of difference. The fourth account is ontological and frames responsibility as an ethical consequence of our being as opposed to our not-being. This account is advanced by Hans Jonas, although related ethical arguments are present in the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, and Martin Buber. Finally, there is political responsibility as political ethics. This is the account we see with Max Weber and Hans Morgenthau, and provides a useful reminder of how important context is for understanding what our political responsibilities are. But the ethic of responsibility we find in their work also contributes to my general claim that political responsibility is best understood phenomenologically.

## Responsibility as a signifier

Finding meaning can be surprisingly difficult. Looking up a word in a dictionary offers only one mechanism by which we discover the meaning of words. Meaning is a product of the way words are used. As Wittgenstein (2009, 693) shouts in *Philosophical Investigations*, “And nothing is more wrong-headed than to call meaning something of a mental activity!” We cannot find meaning outside of the language we use (Gunnell 2014). To understand the meaning of responsibility we should consider how the term is used and what this usage signifies. In this section I demonstrate that the way the term responsibility is deployed demonstrates that what we mean by responsibility is not especially clear.

The concept of responsibility is an interesting one because it is both immensely important and also potentially devoid of any specific content. What I mean by devoid of content is that the meaning of responsibility is often assumed in such a way that the content of what being responsible means can be difficult to specify. To briefly return to the original Responsibility to Protect document, responsibility is about what sovereignty involves, which includes an emphasis on protecting human security. When a state fails in this duty, the international community has a responsibility to prevent, react and rebuild. My point is that when we use responsibility in this context we are ultimately referring to the normative principles of sovereignty, and acting responsibly becomes a reference to the norms of the international community. None of this actually explains what responsibility means.

Toni Erskine, a leading scholar of responsibility in international politics, offers a systematic critique of who can be considered to be a moral agent in international relations. For her, the matter of responsibility in international politics is a moral one, and the application of responsibility requires that we are able to identify which types of agents can be held responsible. This identification is, she points out, not obvious. As she writes, “Claims to moral responsibility are ubiquitous in world politics” (Erskine 2014, 117).<sup>2</sup> However, this ubiquity is despite the paradox of how, “Theorizing about international relations ...[assumes] that though states are actors (often the actors) in international relations, they are not capable of specifically moral action” (Erskine 2001, 67). The point being that there can be no responsibility if we cannot hold specific agents in international

politics to be moral agents. Erskine seeks to resolve this paradox by arguing that there is a type of collective responsibility that can be applied in international politics, and the way she makes this argument is to focus on the agent. Serena Parekh (2011, 673) makes a similar move by focusing on the state as being able to “assume political responsibility.”

A difficulty with this approach, however, is that instead of explaining how we are responsible, the focus becomes on what types of agents we can apply the concept of responsibility onto. Hence Erskine (2018) notes that responsibility refers to a combination of agency and freedom. She also argues (Erskine 2014, 117) that there are two different types of judgements that characterize responsibility:

Prospective moral responsibility involves *ex ante* judgments regarding acts that ought to be performed, or forbearances that must be observed. Retrospective moral responsibility entails *ex post facto* assessments of a particular event or set of circumstances for which an agent’s acts or omissions were such that the agent is the object of praise or blame. The forward-looking variation is heard in assertions of duty and obligation; the backward-looking variation emerges most often in charges of blame and accountability.

By focusing on the agent, Erskine reveals an interesting complexity. Responsibility is ontological (hence the focus on what types of agents can be held to *be* responsible), but it is also temporal insofar as responsibility is both forward and backward looking, and it is also deontological as a means to apply an ethical standard to various situations. What this explanation suggests is not just that there is a temporal dimension to what responsibility means (I will return to this dimension later), but that the way we judge what is responsible always refers to something outside of responsibility itself: blame, praise, duty, obligation and accountability.

Treating responsibility as a signifier is evident in a range of approaches. In *Men in Groups: Collective Responsibility for Rape*, Larry May and Robert Strikwerda (1994, 148) argue that, “in western societies, rape is deeply embedded in a wider culture of male socialization. Those who have the most to do with sustaining that culture must also recognize that they are responsible for the harmful aspects of that culture.” In that paper, they represent responsibility as a combination of complicity (they are not arguing “that all men are responsible for the prevalence of rape” (May and Strikwerda 1994, 148)), and of benefiting from outcomes that emerge from this complicity. Responsibility in this context is something that is widely shared. Responsibility also involves a relationship between identifiable agents and a specific outcome, even if the agents did not directly cause this outcome. Their argument is structurally similar to Farid Abdel-Nour’s (2003, 713), who writes that, “where there is national pride, there is national responsibility.” The shared point being that we are implicated and thus responsible for conditions, circumstances or events that affirm a position of benefit, be it political, economic, cultural or emotional. Responsibility refers to how complicity enables a benefit. Inaction matters. By casting complicity and inaction with benefit, these concepts carry a normative character that makes them evidence of responsibility. Responsibility signifies this normative character.

The signifying character of responsibility is perhaps most clearly presented by Bernard Williams (1993, 55), who in *Shame and Necessity* writes that “we might label [the] four elements [of responsibility] cause, intention, state [of mind], and response. These are the basic elements of any conception of responsibility.” Responsibility functions as a normative pointer towards features that characterize particular actions. The definition of responsibility appears to be a structural one first, and a normative one second. Central to this structural character of responsibility is its causal dimension.

For example, Sarah Clark Miller (2011) proposes that responsibility is a form of the ethics of care, and others have addressed or responded to the causal character of responsibility (Braham and

VanHees [2011](#); Parekh [2011](#); Reiff [2008](#); Richman [1969](#); Rosen [2004](#)). Importantly, however, even when framed causally, responsibility is not a normative example of rigorism, where “certain duties (principles, rules, or whatever one calls them) are exceptionless or absolute” (Frey [1978](#), 106) – which might appear relevant in the cause of causal rules.

Responsibility does not necessarily tell you what to do (i.e. do not lie). Responsibility refers to outcomes that emerge because of a previous action or choice, or in some cases simply by virtue of our membership in a particular community. It is not necessary that the agent produces the responsibility so much as responsibility presents itself as a response to specific situations. Responsibility emerges out of our participation in the world.

This relational and structural dimension of responsibility is consistent with its etymology. The word responsibility comes from the Latin *respondeo*, which translates as I answer (Lucas [1993](#), 5). However, *respondeo* has its own etymology, as it is a combination of *re-* and *spondeo*. *Re* is a Latin prefix that not only refers generally to a past action or a backward motion but is also forwarding looking as it means to repeat something. *Spondeo* mean promise, guarantee or pledge. *Re-spondeo* can be translated as “I promise.” Thus, the idea of responsibility is more than just to answer. Responsibility is to commit yourself in some way. It is something that we do in response to a question, call or challenge and is relational or reactive to a past event or action but is forward looking. It is a reaction to a situation in which our action binds ourselves in some way. To define responsibility in a meaningful sense is to explain the character of this structural relationship, so that as agents we can determine what types of actions *become* or *are* responsible. Responsibility is always something we *do* because it is a part of who we *are*. Our responsibilities change in different contexts because responsibility is “a social practice” in which people “rely on their (conflicting) values and beliefs and on their best interpretations of the facts and of social conventions” (Goodhart [2017](#), 21, 22). To put this differently, because responsibility emerges out of specific conditions, there will always be different types of responsibility because there is always a multiplicity of conditions we will face in our lives.

Responsibility appears to require a reference to something external to itself, such as agency, causality, accountability, etc. None of these are by themselves moral terms, and one function of the concept of responsibility as a normative category is partly to transform them into ones. What we need is a kind of map in which we frame the different ways in which responsibility is meaningful. This map would help reveal how the concept of responsibility works to impart a normative dimension to choices and actions.

## The plural theory

The following five accounts of responsibility are intended to collectively contribute to mapping out the terrain in which responsibility carries meaning. They are all political because they all respond in some measure to the human condition of plurality, which, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt ([1958](#), 7), is that women and men, not woman or man, inhabit the earth. A consequence of this condition is that our public choices have consequences that we are unable to witness directly. Political responsibility involves decisions and practices that shape the lives of people that we do not know (Beardsworth [2015](#)). What we need is a mechanism by which it is possible to understand the role of our actions and choices in our collective lives as members of multiple communities. This mechanism is political responsibility (compare Beardsworth in this volume). What the following five-point account also demonstrates is that political responsibility functions as a normative structure in a phenomenological sense.

### *Causal or liable*

The causal or liable account states that I can be held accountable for a particular outcome that emerged as a direct consequence of my actions or choices. There are, of course, different causal relations in any account of responsibility. R. G. Frey (1978) notes that there are contributory causes as well as necessary and sufficient ones. A decade later, Shelly Kagan (1988, 293), queried how responsibility is causal, writing “I want to try to understand the view that having caused harm generates a special obligation to aid the victim of that harm.” Kagan (1988, 301) is specifically interested in why “causing harm... is the offensive relation... that generates the special obligation.” Her point is to highlight that there is something specifically different between allowing and doing. This is an important insight. Any account of responsibility needs to understand that to be responsible is to recognize that our actions and choices do create outcomes, and that because we contributed to creating these outcomes, we bear a responsibility for them. The law works in this way, this is an important part of responsibility, and it must play an important part in politics. Political leaders and political activists should be held responsible for their decisions and actions.

However, the causal account is limiting, or as Kagan acknowledges, confusing. A limitation of the causal account is evident in how it is not clear how responsibility is transmitted. If my inaction contributes to an outcome did I cause that outcome? What if I acted with a clear intention to make X happen, but Y did instead? Am I responsible for Y? What about complicity? Am I responsible for something I did not directly cause but somehow through my actions contributed towards? Whatever the answers to these questions, the point is that causality functions as a “vehicle” for responsibility (Sartorio 2004, 328). Thus, whether it is inaction, action, or intent, in the responsibility literature they often fall on how the different types of causal relations work to transmit responsibility. The causal model of responsibility refers to such conditions, where we can be held to account for what our choices lead to. But the complexity (intent, inaction, action, are clearly very different) means that we cannot rely exclusively on a causal account of responsibility (and not only because it would require a clear exposition on what is causality).

### *Non-causal/non-liable (membership)*

Political choices are about not keeping silent and in recognizing that as members of a diverse society it is incumbent upon us all to appreciate how our own actions have consequences that may not be directly causal. Political responsibility requires that we take the first kind of responsibility not only in regard to our own actions (being accountable for our decisions and behaviour) as members in a society but also that our choices implicate us in a wider range of societal and political effects. In this sense, who we align ourselves with, that which we tolerate without speaking against, and the actions of complicity all contribute to being politically responsible that is not directly causal (compare chapter by Shadmy in this volume).

Reflecting on the Holocaust, Hannah Arendt came to the conclusion that one of its enabling conditions was that good people did not speak out or stand up when they had the chance to. Later writers, notably Iris Marion Young (2013) and Jade Schiff (2014) have taken up this argument by exploring how to foster an account of responsibility that does not require liability. Arendt opens her essay, *Collective Responsibility*, stating that “There is such a thing as being responsible for things one has not done” (Arendt 2003, 147). Arendt, who is also concerned with distinguishing guilt from political responsibility, is making an important point, that: “Every government assumes responsibility for the deeds of its predecessors and every nation for the deeds and misdeeds of the past” (Arendt 2003, 149). The only mechanism for escaping our political responsibility is to leave our community, but because we “cannot live without belonging to some community” (Arendt 2003, 150) we are always faced with our fair share of political responsibility.

Our political responsibility emerges from the condition of membership, but we are not all responsible in the same way. This is why Arendt is at pains to distinguish guilt from political responsibility. Her

concern is that if we are all equally guilty, then it is not possible to differentiate the guilt of someone like Eichmann from any other German at that time. We can see here how Arendt is making a distinction that still allows for a causal account of responsibility which is legally necessary, but that there remain other forms of responsibility.

Nevertheless, Arendt appears to be suggesting that our political responsibility emerges purely out of membership in the political community regardless of what we may do (or not do). Iris Marion Young notes that this is deeply unsatisfying because of how Arendt appears to focus on membership to the exclusion of what people actually do (Young 2013, 79). Young argues that although Arendt sticks in part to this account in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in that book she also provides some modifications. Indeed, it is unlikely that Arendt would be dismissive of action as a component of responsibility. How we act as members is what I take Arendt to be getting at; that our membership incurs a special responsibility. This membership creates choices for its members that others may not have. Membership may not make all its members legally liable for the actions of the state, for example, but it does mean that all members have a special stake in the future of the community, and are burdened by its past. As such, membership does create specific contexts for political responsibility that non-members may not have.

A non-liable model of responsibility is especially important in international politics. Injustices are rarely exclusively national. For Schiff, political responsibility is about how to respond to situations where we are implicated in the suffering of others. Political responsibility arises when our conduct involves implicating ourselves because of our actions or choices in the suffering of other people. Choices such as deciding what products to buy (where were they made, and in what working conditions?), where to buy them (what are the employment practices of that company?), what foods we consume (did they come from sustainable farming?) and so on reveal that our everyday choices can carry far reaching consequences that each of us, individually, cannot be held liable for.

### *Identity and intersubjectivity*

Intersubjectivity is an ontological basis for understanding the processes of interpreting the world. In explaining intersubjectivity, Charles Taylor (1971, 27) writes:

It is not just that the people in our society all or mostly have a given set of ideas in their heads and subscribe to a given set of goals. The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relations, of mutual action.

Intersubjectivity emphasizes how we come into contact with a world of meaning. The world is not made up of empty vessels into which we impart meaning (like filling a glass). We are never faced with objects that are empty or bare of meaning, that are inherently meaningless (Heidegger 2013). As we come into contact with this world of meaning, one that shapes our experiences, interpretations and understanding of this world, we also contribute to this world of meaning. A consequence of this intersubjective condition is that what I know is never authentically mine. It is also always someone else's. Our ability to make sense of the world depends upon our participating in a world of meaning where this meaning is not solely produced by ourselves as isolated individual minds. Because we do not produce a meaningful world by ourselves, we depend on a world of plurality.

This condition of plurality means that the knowledge I have of the world – knowledge that enables my functioning in this world – is never only mine, this knowledge is shared in a world of others. The world of plurality has significance for our identity as well. There is, as William Connolly argues, an ethic to identity. He writes that, “You need identity to act and to be ethical...” (Connolly 2002, xix)

and, “To be ethical is to put identity, to some degree, at risk.” (Connolly 2002, xix). In that work, Connolly is not concerned with political responsibility, but the connection between identity and ethics that he proposes can be applied to political responsibility. By making a claim to belonging we are always making a normative commitment that aligns who we are with the values of that community which we belong to. Hence, the famous Groucho Marx joke about not wanting to join a club that would have him as a member. The punchline being that belonging is a sign of shared values (*I would not want me in their club!*). Membership of this sort (of any, for that matter) is always also a claim to identity. But more than that, anytime we make a claim to identity we do so in an intersubjective way. We cannot make a claim to identity without also appreciating the world of difference that makes our claims to identity meaningful and possible.

Political responsibility functions in a similar regard. Not as a joke, but as a signpost to how political responsibility is always also a claim to identity. Political responsibility emerges as a response, and as such it is also a risk of sorts. Responsibility is, remember, an answer. To answer responsibly is to recognize that there is a choice that involves the risk of irresponsibility. We never know for sure what our choices will lead to. St. Augustine knew as much, which is why he writes that, “ignorance is unavoidable, and ... judgment is also unavoidable....” (Augustine 1998, 927 (Book XIX 6)). Uncertainty is always a feature of our political choices. Political responsibility reflects this uncertainty because to be responsible is to take a risk. It is to reveal yourself in the face of a difficult situation, and to live with the consequences. It is also to be responsible to this world that enables us to make claims to identity.

This account of political responsibility is based in an ontological claim about our being, and that this claim is always an uncertain one, uncertain insofar as our knowledge is never our own and because of how difference and plurality are necessary for any claim to identity. One consequence of this twofold condition of intersubjectivity and plurality is that to be responsible is to recognize our own fallibility, because what we know is never only ours, and is never certain.

## *Ontological*

Responsibility is always both backwards and forwards looking. We are responsible for that which we have done or been complicit in and also for the future outcomes of our choices. In this sense, responsibility is about who we are across time and space. Responsibility is a meaningful relation that conditions our being across time in specific places that informs our identities and opportunities (or lack thereof) for action. Responsibility is thus always also to some extent, ontological.

There is, to the best of my knowledge, only one theory of political responsibility that is explicitly ontological, and it is provided by Hans Jonas.

To explain the ontological account, I need to make a brief clarification. I am using (hermeneutic) phenomenology in the Heideggerian (Heidegger 2013) sense insofar as political responsibility is ontological by it functioning as a meaningful structure in the relations of our being. Heidegger is infamous for his political choices, and of the possible linkage between his politics and his philosophy (Faye 2009). This is not a debate I will engage with here, but needless to say, it is curious that in *Being and Time* Heidegger does not engage in any political discussions.<sup>3</sup> It is *Heidegger's Children* (Wolin 2015) who do – perhaps in spite of him. For example, The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas can be read as an ethical critique of Heidegger, and Hans Jonas's argument about political responsibility is another such attempt.

In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas argues that we have a responsibility to the future of humanity, and that this responsibility functions in the same way that being a parent does. Responsibility is, for him, a duty for the future existence and conditions of humanity. While this

might appear to be some kind of social contract with the future, it is not. That is because Jonas' argument is not contractual, it is ontological.

It is ontological because of how it approaches the condition of our being. Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, develops a philosophical language for making sense of the structures of the world that make it meaningful to us in its being. What this means is that the essence of a hammer, for example, is hammering. Jonas turns this question onto the character of being itself, and, similar to Heidegger, asks what the being of our Being (our existence) is. To put this crudely, they want to know what our beingness entails. Jonas argues that because of our being, as opposed to our not-being, there is an imperative for being. Thus, the very first imperative, he states, is that there is humankind. As he writes, "The first rule, is therefore, that no condition of future descendants of humankind should be permitted to arise which contradict the reason why the existence of mankind is mandatory" (Jonas 1979, 43). This imperative creates an ontological responsibility: "With this imperative we are, strictly speaking, not responsible to the future of human individuals but to the *idea* of man" (Jonas 1979, 43). Our being, he suggests is not just a question of what it means *to be*, but rather, what it means that we "ought-to-be" (Jonas 1979, 50). He writes, "In every purpose, being declares itself for itself and against nothingness... the fact that being is not indifferent toward itself makes its differences from nonbeing the basic value of all values, the first 'yes'" (Jonas 1979, 81). However, it is not just the "what" of our being that matters, but the "how" of acting" (Jonas 1979, 88).

He proceeds to develop a theory of responsibility. There is more to this theory than our existence. His concern is in part inspired by the human ability to develop technologies that threaten our very existence. Thus, he notes that the first condition of responsibility is a causal one. The causal dimension here is that "acting makes an impact on the world, and ... that such acting is under the agent's control" (Jonas 1979, 20). Responsibility is something that we do, and it has consequences, consequences that this agent can "foresee... to some extent" (Jonas 1979, 90–91). However, Jonas points out that the responsibility under these three conditions (impact/causal, agency/control, and foreseeable/temporal) can be different. We can be responsible *for* something – formal responsibility. But we can also *be* a responsible person – substantive responsibility.

Jonas is formulating responsibility phenomenologically in a Heideggerian sense. Responsibility is something that we *are*, or can be. But it is also a framework for action, and actions happen in time as evidence by one action leading to future consequences, and this action being in some sense fashioned by what came before. We *are* always responsible *in* time.

The formal conception of responsibility is, nevertheless, in practical terms, effectively the same as the liability model already discussed (Jonas 1979, 90). It is the substantive one where Jonas develops the ontological dimension. The point he is making here is that the "ought-to-be" leads to an "ought-to-do" and this second ought pertains to the care that we have for our being and to the future. Responsibility is not a reciprocal relation because responsibility is different from, for example, solidarity because it is unconditional and involves a vertical relation. The model he uses, indeed the model that he describes as the "archetype of all responsibility" is that of the parent (Jonas 1979, 101). There are a few reasons he gives for making this claim, but the main ones pertain to continuity and the future, that the relation is a vertical one (at least for a time), and that it is unconditional and does not demand a reciprocal relation. While it is unlikely that *The Imperative of Responsibility* is about to become a best-selling parenting book, and I am not going to comment on how Jonas frames parenthood, his insight here is that being responsible does not require reciprocity, that it has a temporal dimension, that it follows from the normative question of our being, and that it is both causal (liable) and ontological.

## *Political ethics*



The fifth account of political responsibility treats political responsibility as political ethics. This reading of responsibility relies heavily on the thought of Machiavelli, Weber and Morgenthau. But I am not suggesting that this is a “realist” account of political responsibility. Rather, the point here is that there exists a kind of political responsibility that is specific to those who hold public office, and who must make decisions for the general welfare or benefit of the country.

It might appear that political responsibility of this kind is distinct from any moral considerations. Indeed, in Morgenthau’s (early) writings, foreign policy should always be based on the national interest and not moral considerations. As he wrote in 1949, “A foreign policy which is guided primarily by moral considerations is not only threatened with failure; it can be successful only by accident” (Morgenthau 1949, 210). National interest was what ought to guide the responsible statesperson. What precisely characterizes the national interest may change, but the point he is making is to distinguish a particular kind of political ethics – in which political and moral considerations are separate (Morgenthau 1949, 210).

The Vietnam War, however, changed his mind. Morgenthau’s opposition to the Vietnam War compelled him to become something of an activist, or at least to exercise what he felt to be the political responsibility that comes with academic freedom (Molloy 2019), and he regularly spoke out against the War. The Vietnam War,

led Morgenthau to expand his notion of the national interest, which he had promoted as the supreme guide to realist decision-making in foreign affairs. In his revised view, serving the national interest came to mean more than ensuring American security in the Western Hemisphere and maintaining a balance of power in Europe and Asia. He argued that the United States must uphold its exceptional moral stature as a model of integrity for the rest of the world.

(Rafshoon 2001, 57)

This War transformed “Morgenthau, the jaded Central European, [into] a moralist” (Rafshoon 2001, 71). Morgenthau still adhered to the principle of national interest, but he came to recognize that this interest includes a moral component, and was not simply about balancing.

Morgenthau, however, realizes along with Machiavelli and Weber, that morality in politics is of a particular variety. Part of the reason for this is, as Hannah Arendt notes, “politics is not like the nursery” (Arendt 1994, 279). Both her and Weber share the conviction that politics involves recognizing the consequences of one’s choices. This is the brunt of the ethic of responsibility that Weber develops in his essay *The Vocation of Politics*. It does not matter what intentions are, what matters are outcomes. This is why Weber quotes Fichte who in turn is citing Machiavelli, writing about the ethic of responsibility that, “He does not feel that he is in a position to shift the consequences of his actions, where they are foreseeable, onto others. He will say, ‘These consequences are to be ascribed to my actions’” (Weber 2004, 84).

From Weber’s perspective, politics may very well involve the use of violence, regardless of one’s convictions. Political responsibility includes a particular type of (political) ethics. Such ethics may mean that, as Machiavelli (1988, 59) writes, “It is desirable to be both loved and feared, but it is difficult to achieve both and, if one of them has to be lacking, it is much safer to be feared than loved.” Or, as Weber (Weber 2004, 59) put it in one especially chilling passage,

Anyone who wishes to engage in politics at all, and particularly, anyone who wishes to practice it as a profession, must become conscious of these ethical paradoxes and of his own responsibility for what may become *of him* under the pressure they exert. For, I

repeat, he is entering into relations with the satanic powers that lurk in every act of violence.

For Weber, political responsibility is always about outcomes and the recognition that the outcomes may not be moral ones in any Kantian sense. Consequences are the crux of responsibility, but there is also an ontological dimension insofar as what happens to the person who makes political choices is a part of the ethic of responsibility.

Weber is emphasizing something particularly important, and easily missed. Political responsibility is not just about consequences and outcomes, it is about uncertainty. It is in not knowing what our choices will lead to – nobody has such predictive powers – that characterizes responsibility. This characterization is in contrast to the ethic of conviction in which ideology overcomes the potential of any lingering doubt from not knowing. To be responsible is to embrace that we do not know for sure what our actions will produce in politics, but that intention is not the measure of our responsibility. As David Owen and Tracy Strong ([Weber 2004](#), xii) write an introductory essay about Weber's vocation essays, "it does no good in politics to say that you did not intend the (unfortunate) consequences of your actions." This uncertainty and the divorce of responsibility from intention are key features in responsibility – what makes it political in a Weberian sense is the underlying possibility of violence or force of some kind. But political responsibility is not really about violence. Rather, political responsibility is about recognizing this twofold character of uncertainty and outcome.

It is not, however, obviously clear how uncertainty and outcome correspond to how political responsibility means acting in the national interest. Morgenthau, nevertheless, did share with Weber a concern about distinguishing an ethic of conviction from an ethic of responsibility. This distinction is clear when Morgenthau challenges the architects of the Vietnam War as ideologically driven and prone to revisionist assessments that support the war ([Morgenthau 1968](#); [Rafshoon 2001](#)). There is, then, some synergy across these thinkers vis-à-vis how to conceptualize what responsibility means without then identifying the content of being responsible. This synergy is further evidence that the idea of responsibility functions not as a moral rule as such, but as a normative structure. Political responsibility is about understanding what the right thing to do is, under the circumstances.

## **Conclusion: "What has the future ever done for me?"<sup>4</sup>**

In this chapter I have suggested that responsibility functions phenomenologically. To be responsible or to act responsibly is to recognize that our being carries within it some normative characteristics that pertain to the world(s) in which we live. What I have not argued for is what the content of responsibility is. In other words, what it means to recognize our responsibility for climate change, for example, will mean different things to different people, and different people will have different conditions of opportunity in which to respond to climate change responsibly. Responsibility is a normative framework that attributes a moral or ethical dimension to our being. If responsibility is to be simplified in a way that draws on the five accounts developed here, it is that political responsibility is about our being across time, and that responsibility may be backward looking, but it is concerned with the future.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, [Mapel \(1998\)](#), [May \(1989\)](#), [Miller \(2007\)](#), [Striblen \(2007\)](#) and [Walzer \(1970\)](#). Duty is sometimes used in political theory as a vehicle for obedience ([Rawls 1999](#)), whereas (political) obligation is generally restricted to the obligation that citizens have to obey the law ([Horton 2010](#); [Simmons 1980](#)).

<sup>2</sup> See also, [Erskine \(2001, 67\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> For an opposing view see [Olafson \(1998\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> See [Jonas \(1979, 39\)](#).