



The Intellectual Standard

Volume 1 | Issue 2

Article 2

2012

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Michael Christison

Illinois Wesleyan University, mchrist2@iwu.edu

Recommended Citation

Christison, Michael (2012) "Responsibility," *The Intellectual Standard*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/tis/vol1/iss2/2>

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April 2012

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Responsibility

Michael Christison, Editor

In our society there is a systematic failure to recognize certain crucial principles about the human condition, especially by those in positions of power. Parents and policy-makers alike focus too greatly on removing personal responsibility and too little on allowing it. The result is a gradual removal of the individual's authority as the arbiter of his or her own life. Part of the reason for this problem is that "responsibility" as a concept has become somewhat ambiguous, and thus, it has become misunderstood. Reaching a solution requires the clarification of what responsibility is and an understanding of why it is important.

Sometimes people think of blame for some wrongdoing in regard to responsibility. Others may believe that to be responsible is essentially to be accountable, most often *to someone* or *for something*. In the philosophical realm, the discussion has been addressed with respect to four main topics: responsible agency, retrospective responsibility, prospective responsibility, and responsibility as a virtue.¹ There has not been a clearly settled conclusion about how to analyze the word itself. From my perspective, the most reasonable way to understand "responsibility" is by dividing it into two primary components that work in conjunction with one another. These two components are derived from the term's two main usages. In what follows, I will refer more to these components than responsibility as a whole in order to disambiguate the issue.

Often when we say "a responsibility," we are referring to some particular *obligation*. The condition for *being responsible* is met when we satisfy that obligation. If my friend loans me money, I have a responsibility—an obligation—to pay my friend back. If I succeed in paying the money back, someone would probably describe me as being responsible. By this approach, "responsibility," would refer generally to this process of obligation-fulfilling, a process comprised of responsibilities to someone or to the self.²

1 IEP, 4 Feb 2012, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/responsi/>

2 It would probably not be inaccurate to equate this component to the concept of moral duty. An obligation to the self involves a general practice of self-preservation. An obligation to someone else mostly involves satisfying contracts or

A common phrase that tends to emit from the mouths of parents is that, “Our child needs to have more responsibilities around the house.” In this sense, it is best defined as *the authority to decide and act*. Say the child is given the responsibility to take care of the pet dog, Sparky. This would mean that the child has the authority to make most of the important decisions regarding Sparky’s life. The child would choose when Sparky is fed, when he exercises, and possibly even when he goes to the bathroom. Similarly to the previous example, the child is described as “responsible” if Sparky is successfully taken care of. These would be responsibilities of something—as in the responsibility of taking care of Sparky.

In my stating that authority is something given or allowed, one might be led to assume that authority is granted only by others. One might also conclude that obligations come from people other than the self. Neither is the case. Individual authority is intrinsic to all the actions that we choose to take. At the most basic level, we are individuals. We do not have immediate authority over other individuals to make their decisions or take actions for them, and no one has immediate authority over us. We do, on the other hand, have immediate authority to make our own decisions and take our own actions.³ I must necessarily make decisions for myself, but I do not necessarily need another to ever make a decision for me, all things considered.⁴ It follows that I will *always* have an obligation to make decisions for my own sake, but I will *only sometimes* have an obligation to make decisions for the sake of others.

Thus, obligation and authority coalesce into the concept of responsibility. As I have said, having authority over something means that one must have the ability to make choices regarding that thing. We must have been presented with a situation in which we are to make a decision and act before we can even think about what we ought to do. If my friend never puts me in the position of deciding whether or not to pay the money back, there will be no moral consequences for any decision I make because the

promises. Moral duty that travels beyond this would likely still be consistent with this particular unpacking of “responsibility,” but probably not the analysis that follows.

3 Authority of the public sector is coercive, and authority of the private sector is contractual. Thus, they are both examples of mediate authority. There is more than one agent in these cases.

4 Needing help because of being too young, too old, or incapacitated are the exceptions not the rule. Imagine being stranded on an island.

situation never existed. The same goes for a scenario in which the child is never given the power to make decisions about the dog's life. However, since I am always in a position in which I must make decisions from my perspective, I will never escape the individual obligations I have to myself, i.e., my personal responsibilities.

I have established that we have individual authority, but I have not yet provided any justification for individual obligation. Because we have immediate authority over the self, the most basic types of obligations we would have would be to the self. This is of course given the premise that there can be no talk of obligation without some sense of authority. Some scholars, such as Peter Singer, have argued that this would lead to a certain kind of ethical egoism in which I would have a moral obligation, for instance, to let a drowning child die to keep my new shoes from getting wet. Having an obligation to the self that takes priority over an obligation to others would not necessitate a situation such as this. Rather, I am merely supporting a stance which would not entail that it is impermissible to save the drowning child. In any case, most would agree that people generally ought to keep themselves healthy, happy, and honest.

As I hinted at earlier, there is an inherent problem with taking away the individual authority of others. The general principle is this: *the more authority that individuals lose, the less desire they will have to fulfill obligations to self-preserve and achieve*. There are a plethora of examples to which this principle can be applied, but I should only need to describe a few.

The first is about child-rearing. It is generally accepted that if a child is "babied" for too long, it will take much longer for that child to understand personal responsibility. In fact, the child may never be able to learn how to be responsible. Say I have a baby girl, and as she grows up, I cannot help but spoil her. Whenever she asks for money as a teenager I give it to her, no questions asked. I attempt to help her with homework, but in most cases I will end up doing it for her. When she gets into arguments with teachers, children, or other parents, I always take her side and defend her instead of allowing her to bear the burden of defending herself.

What I have done in all these cases is prevent her from having a great deal of authority over her own life. If I decided to stop giving her money, she would have a difficult time keeping up with her usual expenses because she

has not learned how to preserve herself. Were I to stop doing her homework for her, she would begin to fail all of her classes. Without me to defend her when she gets into trouble, she would not be able to escape the repercussions of her misbehavior. As the authority over her own life is placed back in her possession, she is forced to learn how to be responsible or face the consequences. At this point, however, it may be too late.

A tax can also be seen as a loss of individual authority. If part of the money that I have earned by trading in my time and effort is taken away, I cannot make the same decisions and take the same actions that I could have if less of it is taken away. At a certain point, my desire to keep the same job goes down; thus, my desire to promote my own ends decreases. In the case of the progressive income tax, a higher percentage of money is taken away as more income is gained. If an individual is about to reach the next income bracket, he or she may cease an attempt at further personal achievement.

A similar result occurs when government spends more than it can afford, and money is printed. This results in inflation, and currency is literally worth less to the average person. This means that if I have a static sum of money in a bank account, and the money supply is increased, my net worth goes down overnight. I will no longer care much for that random quarter I find on the street. Again, I will have less of a desire to keep my job or do well at it because I am getting less benefit out of my personal time investment than I should be.

There are plenty of other applications that demonstrate the difficulties posed by this principle, but my goal is merely to bring the problem to light. Individuals in general ought to have authority over their own lives; they ought to have liberty. I am not arguing for a harsh world where no one ever helps anyone else. I am, however, advocating the use of tough love. I argue for a world in which people are put in a position that helps them to realize that the road through life is paved with hard work, risk, and responsibility.