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Responsibility: distinguishing virtue from capacity

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Abstract. Garrath Williams claims that truly responsible people must possess a “capacity ... to respond [appropriately] to normative demands” (2008, p. 462). However, there are people whom we would normally praise for their responsibility despite the fact that they do not yet possess such a capacity (e.g. consistently well-behaved young children), and others who have such capacity but who are still patently irresponsible (e.g. some badly-behaved adults). Thus, I argue that to qualify for the accolade “a responsible person” one need not possess such a capacity, but only to be earnestly willing to do the right thing and to have a history that testifies to this willingness. Although we may have good reasons to prefer to have such a capacity ourselves, and to associate ourselves with others who have it, at a conceptual level I do not think that such considerations support the claim that having this capacity is a necessary condition of being a responsible person in the virtue sense.

1. Williams on responsibility as a virtue

When we call someone “irresponsible” this typically involves a negative kind of evaluation of their character, and when we criticize a person for *being* irresponsible in this sense we do not just criticize them for some specific bad thing that they have done, but rather we criticize *their character*. Naturally, we may be prompted to call someone “irresponsible” because of something that they have done or because of their general history of doing those sorts of things, however this only reveals our epistemic position – i.e. we come to know that someone is irresponsible by building up a picture of their history; a picture which, if sufficiently consistent, arguably reveals things about their character – but it does not show that when we criticize a person for *being* irresponsible we are only criticizing some specific act. On the other hand, when we call someone “responsible” in the sense which is opposite to the term “irresponsible,” this is a positive evaluation of their character – an accolade – and when we praise a person for *being* responsible in this sense we again do not just praise them for some specific good thing that they have done, but rather we praise *their character*. Garrath Williams suggests that when

“irresponsible” and “responsible” are used in this way, what we have in mind is “responsibility as a moral virtue” (2008, pp. 456, 457).

Here are some character traits which Williams associates with people that have this virtue: (i) a person who has this virtue is reliable, (ii) she has commitment to- and carries through with projects once she has started them, (iii) she has initiative, (iv) she can exercise her own judgment, (v) she is trustworthy, (vi) she identifies with her actions and omissions, (vii) she can answer- or is accountable for her actions and omissions, (viii) she makes up for her actions and omissions, (ix) she is conscientious in discharging her responsibilities, (x) she recognizes and deals appropriately with her various and sometimes-conflicting responsibilities, (xi) she can judge whether others are fulfilling their responsibilities, (xii) she can judge who should hold whom responsible for their actions and omissions (2008, pp. 459-462), and (xiii) if appropriate she steps in when others neglect their responsibilities by reporting this to the relevant authorities so that appropriate measures can be taken, and maybe she even takes on those responsibilities herself if no one else can take those measures (2008, p. 467).¹

Many of these character traits relate to the idea that a person who is responsible in this virtue sense will discharge their responsibilities² — i.e. that they will see to it that the things that it is up to them to do get done. But since our responsibilities stem from a possibly wide range of different sources — for instance, although “[r]oles define and clarify [some normative] demands upon us, ... the imperatives of basic human decency” impose their own distinctive normative demands upon us too (2008, p. 467) — Williams therefore schematizes the virtue of responsibility with the suggestion that “responsibility represents the readiness to respond to a plurality of normative demands” (2008, pp. 459, 469).

Much of what Williams says above about responsibility as a virtue strikes me as right; I take issue, however, with something else which he says: namely, his claim that in order to be responsible in the virtue sense a person must actually possess the capacity to respond in the appropriate way, as opposed to, for instance, merely having the right intentions and a history that testifies to such intentions. Williams writes that although when we talk of this virtue “we are also concerned with an agent’s will to employ his abilities” (i.e. whether they have the right intentions, or whether they are well-meaning), he insists that “responsible agents can, and must, judge for themselves,” and hence he argues that “an account of responsibility has to take seriously the *capacity* of responsible agents to

¹ Similar characterizations of responsibility as a virtue are also offered by others (e.g. Haydon, 1978; Williams, 1995; Bovens, 1998; Duff, 1998, p. 291).

²See Robert Goodin’s (1986; 1987) discussion of this use of the term “responsibilities.”

judge. [T]he responsible agent *must appreciate and weigh* these demands, and try as best she . . . can, to negotiate an appropriate response to them” (2008, p. 462, emphasis changed). However, merely *trying* does not seem to be enough for Williams to grant someone the accolade “a responsible person,” since he repeatedly describes this *readiness* in terms of *capacity* or *ability*: for instance, even in his concluding comments he talks of “an agent’s *capacity to manifest* responsibility,” and he says that “[t]o speak of ‘responsible agents’ presupposes that those agents are *able* to judge” (2008, p. 469, emphasis added).

The thought that people must not only be well-intentioned but that they must also possess Williams’ capacity in order to be truly responsible – i.e. that possession of this capacity is a condition of having this virtue – is attractive. However, at the same time I also think that there is something wrong about this idea. Thus, in §2 (immediately below) I first comment on what I think is right about it, but then in §3 I explain why I think that this suggestion should ultimately be rejected. On my account, *pace* Williams, to possess the virtue of responsibility a person needs only to be earnestly willing to do the right thing and to have a history which testifies to that willingness, but they need not actually possess Williams’ capacity.

2. What’s *right* about Williams’ suggestion?

Two things seem right about the suggestion that possession of Williams’ capacity is indeed a condition of being a truly responsible person in the virtue sense: firstly, we probably have good reason to want to be like that ourselves (i.e. to have that sort of capacity); and secondly, we also probably have good reason to prefer to associate ourselves with people who have that capacity rather than with those that do not.

Here are some reasons why we might prefer to be the sorts of people who possess Williams’ capacity rather than to be the sorts of people who have a deficit in this regard. Firstly, such a capacity might make us more independent, since we won’t always have to ask others to tell us what’s right and what’s wrong. Secondly, we might be better-behaved if we have such a capacity, since it will enable us to work out how we should behave in a given situation, and perhaps that will also mean that we will get in trouble less often for doing the wrong thing. Thirdly, those who possess this capacity might be smarter and more sophisticated. Fourthly, if we have this capacity then others might see us (perhaps rightly) as more trustworthy, dependable and accountable, and hence they may be more willing to put us in charge of various projects – i.e. they might be more prepared to give us our own responsibilities – and that might increase our autonomy. But perhaps most importantly, the possession of Williams’

capacity may be thought of as a condition of having a distinctively human dignity, because without this capacity we might be less than fully-fledged moral agents. These are just some brief reflections – none particularly novel – about why we might prefer to be the sorts of people who possess Williams’ capacity rather than to lack it.

And here are some reasons why we may prefer to associate ourselves with others who also have Williams’ capacity — and again, I do not take any of the points that follow to be particularly novel either. Firstly, we might trust those who have this capacity more than we trust those who don’t, since we might think that those who do have it are more likely to accurately assess their own abilities, and hence that they are therefore also more likely to later deliver on their promises. Secondly, we might think that people who have this capacity are more dependable, perhaps because they are less likely to be distracted away from doing their duty (maybe because they can better appreciate the importance of discharging their duties) than others who lack this capacity. Thirdly, if this capacity is indeed a condition of moral agency, then we might also be more justified in expecting those who possess it to do what they ought to do, and that in turn might make us feel more secure about interacting with and relying upon such people. Fourthly, we might only be justified in holding people to account for their actions, for their omissions and for the outcomes of their actions and omissions, and to make up for their wrongdoings, if it was legitimate for us in the first place to expect them to do those things, and that too might make us feel more secure about interacting with such people (perhaps because we might feel that if they do mistreat us in some way then at least we will have a legitimate claim against them to now compensate us for our troubles). Finally, such people’s commitment to the cause – i.e. the fact that they will even take on additional responsibilities in order to make sure that things go according to plan rather than falling apart when someone else neglects their responsibilities – might also make them into attractive people to have as partners, as friends, as colleagues and as cohorts. In fact, as Williams points out, modern liberal societies presuppose a certain system of checks and balances which is only possible when the people and organizations that constitute those societies possess this capacity. One of the main points of his paper, I take it, was to point out that “[r]esponsibility ... is necessary both to sustain [liberalism's institutional] order and to address its inevitable failures in achieving all that we demand of it” (2008, p. 457). Thus, here again there is a conceivably wide range of reasons to prefer to associate ourselves with people who possess Williams’ capacity rather than with people who have a deficit in this regard.

There are many reasons to prefer ourselves to be- as well as to associate ourselves with people who have Williams’ capacity. People who

have that capacity as well as the character traits which Williams associates with this virtue are paragons of responsibility, and we have much reason to admire them. But the question that needs addressing is not whether we should hold this capacity in high regard or admire the people who have it, but it is rather whether to be a responsible person in the virtue sense one needs to have this capacity, and that is the question to which I now turn.

3. What's *wrong* with Williams' suggestion?

Williams asserts that in order for someone to be responsible in the virtue sense, they must *actually* possess the capacity to appropriately respond to a variety of normative demands — i.e. he claims that the possession of this capacity is a condition of being a responsible person. However, in this section I argue for the following two claims: firstly, that we should distinguish between two different responsibility concepts that I will call *virtue responsibility* and *capacity responsibility*; and secondly, that having capacity responsibility is *not* a condition of being virtue responsible. The second of these two claims is a denial of Williams' suggestion, and so if this section's arguments are sound then Williams' suggestion should be rejected.

3.1. DISTINGUISHING CAPACITY RESPONSIBILITY FROM VIRTUE RESPONSIBILITY

Consider the following example about my two children, Jane and John:

Jane is 8 years old and very well behaved. She gets up in the morning all by herself, she washes and gets dressed and even makes her own lunch, she doesn't fight with other kids at school, after school she does her homework, she cleans up after herself, she helps me make dinner, and she even looks out for her older brother John. However, despite the fact that Jane is such a responsible little girl, I also know that she is ultimately only a little girl – she still lacks the mental capacities that one needs to have in order to be a fully responsible person – and so I do not really blame her when she sometimes fails to do these things. Jane is a responsible person, even though she is not yet a responsible person; or put in a less ambiguous way, Jane is a responsible little girl, even though she is not yet a fully responsible person.

Now consider John, Jane's older brother. John is 17 years old and not at all like his much younger sister — some would call John an irresponsible young man. He wags school, he won't make his own lunch even though bought lunch is much more expensive, if and when he gets to school he always gets in some kind of trouble with the teachers, his

bedroom is a pigsty and we are always cleaning up after him in the rest of the house; he can not even be trusted to look after his little sister. Nevertheless, despite the fact that John is an irresponsible young man, we all know him well enough to know that he is actually a fully responsible person – we’ve seen what he is capable of doing when he puts his mind to things – and that is precisely why we are so very dark on him for his constant misbehaviour. John is not a responsible person, even though he is a responsible person; or put in a less ambiguous way, John is an irresponsible young man, even though he is in fact a fully responsible person.

Here are some claims about Jane and John which strike me as intuitively plausible — I will use this opportunity to introduce some new terminology (*italicised*), the meaning of which should become apparent from its use here and in subsequent paragraphs. Firstly, as regards their *capacity responsibility*, Jane is not yet a fully responsible person but John is a fully responsible person. Secondly, as regards their *virtue responsibility*, Jane is a responsible little girl and John is an irresponsible young man. Thirdly, as regards their *role responsibilities* or things that it is up to each of them to do, Jane has fewer responsibilities than John, and this is at least partly because her capacities are lower than his.³ And finally, as regards their *outcome responsibility*⁴ or the sorts of things

³ See the discussion towards the end of this sub-section for an important qualification. *Role responsibility*, like *virtue responsibility* and *capacity responsibility*, is a term of art; it is not my intention to suggest that we only acquire responsibilities through our more formal roles like parent, teacher, partner and so on, since I agree wholeheartedly with Williams’ plurality claim — i.e. that our responsibilities stem from a possibly wide range of different normative sources (see §1 above). Robert Goodin also mentions and employs this kind of responsibility concept in his own analysis of responsibility, though he calls it “task responsibility” (1987, p. 168).

⁴ *Outcome responsibility* is another term of art, and I take it to be roughly equivalent to what Williams’ calls “retrospective responsibility” (Williams, 2008, pp. 457, 459, 460, & 467). Antony Duff also uses the term “retrospective responsibility” to refer to this backwards-looking responsibility concept (Duff 1998). However, there is no agreement on what terminology should be used to refer to this concept since others have called it a variety of different things. For instance Fischer & Ravizza refer to it as “moral responsibility” for actions, for omissions, or for their consequences (1998b), though I am not fond of this expression because it still fails to adequately differentiate between our *forward-looking* responsibilities with respect to our actions, omissions and outcomes (our “role responsibilities” comprise some of these, though as I argue elsewhere (Vincent, 2006, p. 90) we also have other forward-looking responsibilities which I call “liability responsibility”) and our *backward-looking* responsibility for those things (what I have called above our “outcome responsibility”). Also, Peter Cane calls this backwards-looking responsibility concept “historical responsibility” (2004, p. 162), Thomas Scanlon seems to call it “responsibility as attributability” (1998, p. 248), and Christopher Kutz calls a component of this backwards-looking responsibility concept “causal responsibility” (2004, p. 549). I, however, prefer Stephen Perry’s term “outcome responsibility” (2000, p. 555),

(outcomes or more generally states of affairs) for which they can be blamed, John can be blamed for more than Jane, and this is at least partly because his greater capacities mean that we may justifiably expect more of him than we can of her — i.e. John has more and/or greater *role responsibilities* in virtue of his greater *capacity responsibility*,⁵ and because the scope and degree of his *role responsibilities* is expanded he can therefore be *outcome responsible* for more things.

Although my intuitions about these things are not unshakeable or indisputable, I do think that they are at least relatively plausible, and indeed some of my intuitions in this regard — especially the ones about the relationship between capacity responsibility, role responsibility and outcome responsibility — are shared in one form or another by others. For instance, as regards my claim about the link between outcome responsibility and role responsibility, Goodin argues that “different people have different [task] responsibilities [my role responsibilities], *ex ante*, because they are allocated different duties and tasks. And people bear differential *ex post* responsibilities for outcomes, on this account, depending on the role that they played or should have played, pursuant to those *ex ante* task-responsibilities, in producing or averting those outcomes” (1987, p. 179, original emphasis). Secondly, as regards my claim about the link between role responsibility and capacity responsibility, Goodin writes: “I shall say little about the bases upon which these task-responsibilities [my role responsibilities] get assigned to the particular people they do. No doubt part of the story — no doubt a large part of it — has to do with people’s differential capacities for performing the tasks and duties at issue” (1987, p. 180, emphasis added). The picture painted by Fischer and Ravizza also suggests that similar relations obtain between these responsibility concepts; for instance, while talking about the responsibility of young children, they argue that their “gradually expanding range of responsiveness [to reasons — i.e. my capacity responsibility] indicates the class of actions for which the child is properly held accountable” (1998b, p. 80), which is an expression of the same sort of relationship between capacity responsibility and outcome responsibility that I endorsed above. And in an earlier discussion of their “tracing approach,” Fischer and Ravizza point out that the reason why capacity responsibility matters to outcome responsibility is because someone with adequate capacity “can reasonably be expected to have known” how they ought to have behaved — i.e. that capacity responsibility bears on role responsibilities (1998b, p. 50, they develop these ideas further in Chapters 4 and 5). In any case, in the discussion that follows I will treat these

since it cleanly captures the idea of a form of responsibility which looks backwards in time towards states of affairs (outcomes) that *were* brought about.

⁵ See the discussion at the end of this sub-section for an important qualification.

intuitions about the different kinds of responsibility claims that can be made about Jane and John, and about the relations which obtain between these different responsibility concepts, as veridical.

The first thing which I hope to highlight with the Jane and John example and the related intuitions and discussion is that it is one thing to talk about whether someone is a responsible or an irresponsible person in the virtue sense of the term “responsibility” (i.e. what I call “virtue responsibility”), and that it is quite another thing to talk about whether they are fully responsible or not fully responsible in the capacity sense of the term “responsibility” (i.e. what I call “capacity responsibility”). As regards their virtue responsibility, Jane can be praised for the fact that she is such a responsible little girl, and John can be criticized for the fact that he is such an irresponsible young man; but as regards their capacity responsibility, something quite the opposite is the case — the right thing to say about Jane is that she is not yet a fully responsible person, and the right thing to say about John is that he is a fully responsible person. Thus, saying that someone is a virtue responsible person need not yet tell us anything about whether they are capacity responsible (think of Jane), and saying that they are a capacity responsible person need not yet tell us anything about whether they are virtue responsible (think of John).

If capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility were the same concepts, then whenever we assess a person we should find that our judgments about their capacity responsibility and their virtue responsibility coincide. However, as the intuitions in the Jane and John example demonstrate, our judgments about capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility can come apart — Jane is a (virtue) responsible little girl even though she is not yet a (capacity) responsible person, and despite the fact that John is a fully (capacity) responsible person he is nevertheless an (virtue) irresponsible young man. Although a paragon of responsibility might be *both* capacity responsible and virtue responsible at the same time – i.e. they might possess Williams’ capacity as well as have a consistent history that testifies to their admirable character traits – and there might also be others who lack Williams’ capacity *as well as* having a consistent history of bad behaviour, there is no reason to suppose that capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility must always coincide like that. I take the fact that our judgments about capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility can come apart like this to entail that capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility must be different responsibility concepts.

The second thing which I think this example and the related intuitions show, is that claims about capacity responsibility can play a very different functional role in our thinking about what other responsibility claims can be made about that person, than claims about their virtue responsibility. On the one hand, claims about a person’s capacity responsibility might

affect the sorts of things for which we can blame that person – i.e. they might affect our judgments about the things for which they are outcome responsible – and as I suggested above with support from Goodin’s as well as Fischer and Ravizza’s analyses, they do this by affecting our judgements about that person’s role responsibilities. The thought here is that we can only legitimately blame someone for doing something bad if it was reasonable to expect them not to do it in the first place – for instance, if they had the capacity to realize that they shouldn’t have done that – but since we can only legitimately expect people to do things which they *can* actually do (though see the discussion almost immediately below for an important qualification), capacity responsibility is therefore a condition of outcome responsibility in the sense that a lack of capacity responsibility can reduce the extent of a person’s blame or outcome responsibility. Put another way, people can be excused for doing certain things when the reason why they did those things is because they lacked the capacity to not do them and they were not responsible for this reduced capacity – e.g. because due to their young age they lacked the capacity to realize that they shouldn’t have been doing that – and so claims about capacity responsibility can under the right circumstances perform an *excusing* role in our judgments about blame and outcome responsibility.

On the other hand, claims about a person’s virtue responsibility do not play an excusing role, although they can give us reasons to forgive someone for something bad that they have done and perhaps even to reduce their punishment or whatever other harsh treatment we think is appropriate given what they did. For instance, if John had previously been a model citizen and this was the only thing that he had ever done wrong, then his one slip might perhaps be forgiven — he would still be outcome responsible and blameworthy for what he did, though we may decide to let him off on this occasion since everyone is entitled to a few slip-ups here and there. But given that claims about capacity responsibility play a very different role to claims about virtue responsibility – i.e. claims about a person’s capacity responsibility can play an *excusing* role, whereas claims about a person’s virtue responsibility may only affect whether we *forgive* them for what they have done – that is therefore another reason to suppose that these are in fact two very different responsibility concepts.

Before drawing my intended conclusion though, that capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility are two different responsibility concepts, I must first address two worries: the first relates to an important qualification of the claim that role responsibilities depend on capacity responsibility, and the second has to do with what we might legitimately be entitled to say of someone who seemingly lacks the capacity to stop making wounding remarks (however caused — e.g. by an old head injury) and others like them. On the first point, my suggestion that role

responsibilities depend on capacity responsibility should not be misunderstood as the claim that our role responsibilities are *determined* by our capacity responsibility, since for instance if someone is responsible for the fact that they now have some incapacity, then *that* incapacity can not be cited by them to divest themselves of their responsibilities and thus to avoid blame for having done whatever it was that they did. Fischer and Ravizza comment on this in the context of discussing their “tracing approach” according to which “when an agent is morally responsible for an action that issues from a mechanism that is not appropriately reasons-responsive, we must be able to trace back along the history of the action to a point (*suitably related to the action*) where there was indeed an appropriately reasons-responsive mechanism” (1998a, pp. 50-51, original emphasis). In other words, on their account if someone is responsible for the fact that the mechanism from which their actions stem is not reasons responsive, then the fact that their actions were produced by a mechanism that is not reasons-responsive would not exculpate them of their responsibility. However, although the fact that certain histories – namely, those in which the agent is outcome responsible for their own reduced capacity responsibility – prevent us from citing certain incapacities as exculpatory factors, this does not pose a problem for the point which I am presently advancing, since my point is not that reduced capacity *always* necessarily excuses the incapacitated person (such a claim would be patently false, for instance, in cases where the person is outcome responsible for their own reduced capacity responsibility), but it is rather that while considerations of reduced capacity *can* provide excuses, claims about a person’s virtue responsibility *can not* play this role. This is an important part of the reason why I do *not* claim that our role responsibilities are *determined* by our capacity responsibility but rather why I only claim that there is some kind of a dependence relationship between them.⁶

On the second point, I do not intend any of what I said above to entail that someone who seemingly lacks the capacity to stop making wounding remarks can not be criticized as “nasty” or “spiteful” or whatever else might seem appropriate, even if the reason why they are like this is (for instance) because of an old head injury for which they were not responsible. On my account such criticisms may be perfectly fitting, however they will only be such as long as those criticisms are intended as criticisms of their character — i.e. as statements about their lack of *virtue* responsibility. However, on my account such criticisms would be inappropriate if they were intended as attributions of outcome

⁶ I discuss these and related points in detail elsewhere (Vincent, 2006, pp. 87-123; Vincent, 2008, p. 202).

responsibility or blame to the person concerned, and the reason why I think that this would be inappropriate is precisely because a person whose capacity responsibility is reduced might not satisfy the requirements for being a legitimate target for attributions of blame and outcome responsibility for their actions, omissions and for the consequences of their outcomes and omissions (on the proviso that they are not responsible for their reduced capacity responsibility). And far from this being a lamentable feature of my account of the relations between the different kinds of responsibility concepts that were listed above – most importantly for the present discussion, of the relationships between capacity-, role- and outcome responsibility – I take this to be a virtue of that account since it allows us to say the intuitively correct thing about whether such a person can be criticized as nasty, spiteful or whatever else (yes, they can be criticized for the sort of person that they are), but at the same time it also respects the intuition that such a person may fail to be a legitimate target for attributions of blame and outcome responsibility for the things that they do.

Thus, in summary, there are two reasons to suppose that capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility are two different responsibility concepts: firstly, our judgments about a person's capacity responsibility and their virtue responsibility can come apart; and secondly, while claims about a person's capacity responsibility can perform an excusing function, claims about their virtue responsibility can only play a forgiving role.

3.2. CAPACITY RESPONSIBILITY IS NOT A CONDITION OF VIRTUE RESPONSIBILITY

So far I have argued that capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility are two different responsibility concepts. However, that does not yet show that Williams' claim that the capacity to respond to a plurality of normative demands – undoubtedly an important component of capacity responsibility – is not a condition of being a virtue responsible person. The mere fact that capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility are two distinct concepts is not yet a reason to suppose that those concepts might not be related to each other in some way — for instance, Williams might accept what I have said about these being two different responsibility concepts, but yet he might still nevertheless claim that being responsible in one sense (i.e. capacity responsible) is a condition of being responsible in the other sense (i.e. virtue responsible). Nevertheless, I will now argue that no such relationship between capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility obtains.

The claim that capacity responsibility is a condition of virtue responsibility is ambiguous; it might mean either (i) that capacity

responsibility is a *necessary* condition of virtue responsibility, or (ii) that capacity responsibility is a *sufficient* condition of virtue responsibility, or even (iii) that capacity responsibility is a *necessary and sufficient* condition of virtue responsibility.⁷ However, given the Jane and John example and the related intuitions, I do not think that any of these claims can be sustained.

Firstly, might capacity responsibility be a *necessary* condition of virtue responsibility? Not if we want to retain the intuition that Jane is a responsible little girl — something which I take to be an example of a claim about her virtue responsibility. If capacity responsibility were a necessary condition of virtue responsibility, then since Jane lacks capacity responsibility — after all, she is still only a little girl and she has not yet developed the capacities of a fully mature adult⁸ — she therefore could not be said to be a virtue responsible person. Furthermore, if capacity responsibility were a necessary condition of virtue responsibility, then in light of the fact that Jane is a virtue responsible little girl we would also have to conclude that she is a capacity responsible person — if capacity responsibility were a necessary condition of virtue responsibility, then a virtue responsible person would have to be capacity responsible. But if that were so (i.e. if Jane was capacity responsible) then since capacity responsibility is also a condition of outcome responsibility, we would therefore have to conclude that Jane should not be excused when her behaviour fails to come up to her usual high standards. However, Jane's early age and the associated deficit of capacity is precisely the sort of consideration that *would* normally be taken into consideration when we determine whether someone is to blame/outcome responsible for their bad behaviour, or whether they should be excused for it.⁹ Thus, if we wish to retain the intuition that Jane is a responsible little girl, and if we do not wish to be forced to say that she is fully outcome responsible for the things that she does — or at least if we want to leave open the possibility that her outcome responsibility may sometimes be reduced on account of her young age and thus her reduced capacities — then we'd better not insist that capacity responsibility is a necessary condition of virtue responsibility.

⁷ I do not mean to imply that *Williams* thinks that capacity responsibility is a *sufficient* condition of virtue responsibility, but I do think that this is one possible interpretation of the claim that capacity responsibility is a condition of virtue responsibility, and so for this reason I consider it here along with the other two interpretations of the claim that capacity responsibility is a condition of virtue responsibility.

⁸ I stipulate this as part of my example; for instance, she is not a precocious developer or anything of that sort.

⁹ Though please note my qualifications towards the end of §3.1. above.

Secondly, might capacity responsibility be a *sufficient* condition of virtue responsibility? Not if we want to retain the intuition that John is an irresponsible young man — this too is an instance of a claim which I take to be an example of a claim about someone's virtue responsibility. If capacity responsibility were a sufficient condition of virtue responsibility, then since John is fully responsible in the capacity responsibility sense — this is again something which I stipulate as part of my example — he therefore should be fully responsible in the virtue sense too. However, John is patently irresponsible — he is anything but an example of a virtue responsible person — and so for this reason I urge that we should not suppose that capacity responsibility is a sufficient condition of virtue responsibility.

Finally, might capacity responsibility be a *necessary and sufficient* condition of virtue responsibility? Apart from everything else that was already said above, a further reason why we should reject the suggestion that capacity responsibility is a necessary and sufficient condition of virtue responsibility is because by saying this we would have to deny that irresponsible people (i.e. those who, like John, are not virtue responsible) can ever be blamed for what they do (i.e. that they can be outcome responsible). If capacity responsibility were both necessary and sufficient for virtue responsibility, then claims about a person's capacity responsibility would track claims about their virtue responsibility — for instance, if we said that John is irresponsible then this would entail that he must therefore lack capacity responsibility. However, as I said earlier, claims about a person's diminished capacity responsibility can also perform an excusing function — i.e. the fact that someone lacks capacity responsibility can under the right circumstances (if they are not responsible for this state of affairs) be cited as a legitimate reason to (at least partially) excuse them of their outcome responsibility. But if claims about a person's irresponsibility entailed that they must lack capacity responsibility, and claims about diminished capacity responsibility reduced the extent of their blame or outcome responsibility, then by transitivity claims about a person's irresponsibility might end up excusing them for the bad things that they do!¹⁰ But if anything, the fact that John is an irresponsible young man is a reason to hold him in even lower regard rather than it being a reason to excuse him for the bad things that he does, and so for this reason I do not think that capacity responsibility is a necessary and sufficient condition of virtue responsibility.

¹⁰ Heidi Maibom has recently run this kind of argument in the context of discussing the responsibility of psychopaths (Maibom, 2008). In essence, her claim seems to be that psychopaths should not be excused for the bad things that they do just because they are bad, since a claim like "I couldn't help killing them — after all I'm bad" is not a legitimate excuse.

Capacity responsibility is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient, nor a necessary and sufficient condition of virtue responsibility, and so Williams' suggestion that to be virtue responsible one must also be capacity responsible should be rejected.

4. Conclusion

Linguistic conventions are just that – i.e. conventions – and we could conceivably decide that we are only prepared to give the accolade “a responsible person” (an instance of praising a person for how responsible they are in the virtue sense) to someone who actually possesses Williams' capacities as well as an earnest willingness to do the right thing and a history that testifies to that willingness. Put another way, we could simply stipulate that for someone to have “responsibility as a virtue” they must have both my capacity responsibility and my virtue responsibility.

However, after briefly explaining in §2 of this essay why this suggestion might sound attractive, in §3 I argued that doing this would be unwise because there is an important distinction to be drawn here which would unfortunately be obscured by doing this. Among the various responsibility concepts which populate debates about responsibility there are two similar-sounding but ultimately very different responsibility concepts — i.e. virtue responsibility and capacity responsibility. The distinction between these concepts is visible once we realize that claims about capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility can come apart, and also when we notice that each of these two kinds of claims plays a very different functional role in justifying further claims about responsibility. Furthermore, I also argued that there are good reasons to suppose that having one kind of responsibility (i.e. capacity responsibility) is not any kind of a condition of being responsible in the other sense (i.e. virtue responsible). Thus, if we really wish for some term that will allow us to refer to people who are both virtue- and capacity responsible, then my suggestion is that we should call such people “paragons of responsibility.”

Our language must make it possible to *criticize* someone for the fact that they are irresponsible (that they lack *virtue* responsibility) but at the same time to also attribute responsibility to them for the things that they do (on account that they possess *capacity* responsibility), or to *praise* someone for the fact that they are so responsible (that they possess *virtue* responsibility) but without this necessarily having to entail that they are legitimate targets for attributions of responsibility for the things that they do (since they may lack *capacity* responsibility). Put another way, our language must make it possible to criticize someone's character without this entailing that they are not responsible moral agents, and it must allow

us to praise someone's character without this entailing that they are responsible moral agents. However, these things can only be done if we clearly distinguish the concepts of capacity responsibility and virtue responsibility rather than blurring their boundaries as Williams does. Thus, I now conclude that, *pace* Williams, to be virtue-responsible a person needs only to be earnestly willing to do the right thing and to have a history which testifies to that willingness, but that they need not actually possess Williams' capacity.

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