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0521838304 - Restoring Responsibility: Ethics in Government, Business, and Healthcare

Dennis F. Thompson

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Restoring Responsibility

Ethics in Government, Business, and Healthcare

In this important collection of essays Dennis Thompson argues for a more robust conception of responsibility in public life than prevails in contemporary democracies. He suggests that we should stop thinking about public ethics so much in terms of individual vices (such as selfishness or sexual misconduct) and start thinking about it more in terms of institutional vices (such as abuse of power and lack of accountability).

Among the questions Thompson addresses are: How can we hold officials in large organizations accountable for policies shaped by many different people? Are advisers responsible for the consequences of the advice they give? How can the conflict between secrecy and accountability be resolved? Why do political campaigns corrupt even honest legislators? Why do elections fail to make representatives accountable? His institutional approach also shows why the ethical principles needed in hospital decision making differ from those needed in doctor-patient relations; why good character is neither necessary nor sufficient for the ethical management of corporations; and how democratic responsibility should be promoted in a global society.

Combining theory and practice with many concrete examples and proposals for reform, these essays could be used in courses in applied ethics, legal process, political science, and political theory. They can be read with profit by professionals and by students in graduate schools of public policy, law, public health, medicine, journalism, management, and business.

Dennis F. Thompson is Alfred North Whitehead Professor of Political Philosophy and Director of the Center for Ethics and the Professions at Harvard University.

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Acknowledgments

These essays are contributions to a relatively new field of inquiry, variously called practical ethics or institutional political theory. Working in a nascent field can often be a lonely endeavor, but I am fortunate to have been joined by other pioneers, a group of talented junior and senior scholars from many different disciplines and professions, who recognize the importance of undertaking interdisciplinary and cross-professional study of fundamental values at issue in public life. Many of these scholars have given me advice on the manuscripts that have become the essays in this volume. Their names are mentioned at the beginning of the notes to the relevant essays. Less directly but no less significantly, I have benefited from informal comments and criticisms from the many faculty members and graduate students who have been Fellows in the Center for Ethics and the Professions at Harvard. I would not have written many of these essays without their intellectual stimulation. On some views of responsibility – you are responsible for an outcome if it would not have happened but for your actions – they might be blamed for my errors. But following the more robust view described in Chapter 1, I take full responsibility for this outcome. I know that I can count on my critics to make sure that this taking of responsibility is not a mere ritual.

I have resisted the temptation to revise the essays in light of subsequent historical events and scholarly debate. Except for some editorial changes, they remain mostly as originally published or written. Although there are a number of particular claims I would now wish to qualify and a few I might even abandon, I am encouraged by the four anonymous readers for the Press to believe that the basic arguments

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are no more misguided, and perhaps even more relevant, than when they were originally made. My fundamental positions on most of the questions addressed in the essays have been constant, but close readers will notice some changes in terminology and even a few in substantive argument and methodological approach as they proceed from the earlier to the later essays.

Two of the essays have not been previously published, and one has appeared before only in Spanish. The publishers of the essays in their original forms are acknowledged in the Credits.

In preparing the essays for publication, I have been aided by a highly capable and dedicated team of assistants in the Ethics Center at Harvard. Simone Sandy and Jean McVeigh applied their sharp-eyed editing skills to the entire manuscript. Maria Catoline and Jaime Muehl provided first-class research assistance throughout the process. Jean McVeigh and Mandy Osborne managed the rest of my professional life with efficiency and intelligence. At Cambridge University Press, Terence Moore, Stephanie Achard, and Sally Nicholls provided superior editorial guidance. Joan Green prepared the index. My greatest debt is to my wife Carol, whose loving support has been essential in my life from the first of these essays to the last, and who will, if I am fortunate, be there for all the rest that I may write.

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