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0521327202 - Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology

Edited by Ferdinand Schoeman

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Introduction

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The essays that appear here are the result of an invitation from the editor to various distinguished authors soliciting original contributions on responsibility. Inevitably the contributions that emerge from such a request will be diverse in their approaches and themes. In spite of this, it can be said that the contributions gravitate toward one of two general themes: (1) responsibility for one's own character and (2) culpability and the role of the moral emotions. In this introduction I discuss these general topics and then relate the themes to the essays presented here.

We consider some, but not all, of our behavior to reflect something about ourselves as moral or rational agents. The fact that we can be related in different ways to behavior that has the same public profile causes us some difficulties. Take sleeping, for example: One can fall asleep despite one's best efforts at staying awake, even when one has every incentive to stay awake; or one can fall asleep as a result of a decision to get plenty of rest. In one case falling asleep is something that overcomes one; it is inevitable and has nothing to do with one's reasons. In the other case, falling asleep is something one does and is the result of rational deliberation. (I leave open the possibility that rational agency is itself the result of evolutionary design.) The way we describe or attribute behavior to people reflects our awareness of these differences in relationship to actions. These differences are important to us and are implicit in our practices of attributing behavior to people.¹

It matters to us whether we are responsible because being responsible suggests our potential – that we are engaged as active and self-aware beings with perspectives on what we do and with a contributing and creative role to play in what we become.² To see ourselves as not

¹ See John Austin, "A plea for excuses," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1956–7.

² See Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), chapter IV, especially pp. 310ff.

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responsible is to confront our limits – to regard our lives as passively reflecting personality factors beyond our capacity to effectively re-structure, however good our reasons for doing so may be, and with at most an attenuated sense of self – leaving us in a diminished position in the great chain of being.

Reflections on responsibility often introduce a mistaken causal or psychological picture, perhaps because we suspect that if external and internal factors over which we have no control cause us to be what we are, then we are precluded from any kind of active contribution.³ For instance, Aristotle characterizes behavior that is within our power or voluntary as behavior that is untraceable to starting points outside the agent. (Let's call this the *unmoved-mover principle*.) He illustrates what he means by finding the source of behavior outside the agent through a depiction of situations where behavior is not voluntary: Behavior is not voluntary if it results from constraint or is done in nonculpable ignorance.⁴ In the case of actions performed under either of these circumstances, we think the behavior does not genuinely reflect the moral character of the agent.

It is not clear that the illustrations of nonvoluntary behavior really exemplify the unmoved-mover principle. Indeed, it is not clear that this principle has any rightful role to play in assessing human accountability. If we consider what else Aristotle says about conditions of accountability, we can show the misalignment between the unmoved-mover principle and the attribution practices Aristotle and we recognize.

Consider Aristotle's example of acting in ignorance. Acting on the basis of an understanding of one's environment may be *more* clearly traceable to causes external to the agent than acting in ignorance is. To the extent that knowledge and ignorance are treated as sources of behavior, Aristotle, in endorsing the unmoved-mover principle, has things reversed. Indeed, if most of a person's beliefs were purely internally caused and not appropriately connected with the world, we would immediately think the agent insane, not responsible.

Similarly, the values a person acts on are characteristically internal, even though they presumably have some external cause. The fact that one can offer a causal analysis of a person's values does not in itself

³ Not everyone agrees that this picture is mistaken. See Peter Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). But see also Michael Slote, "Selective necessity and the free will problem," *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), 5–24, and Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

⁴ Nicomachean Ethics III, 5.

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undermine either the values' role as values or their authenticity in reflecting that individual's true character.⁵ Still, if someone threatens me with a shot in the head unless I take a bite of putrid meat, I am not accountable for taking the snack. The source of the motive to eat the meat is partly external, but it is also partly internal – wanting to stay alive. Aristotle addresses this kind of problem by referring to what we would normally want to do. I would normally want to avoid eating putrid meat, but will choose to if my life depends on it. Although I have not necessarily lost control over what I will do if so threatened, I will have lost some personally valuable options – namely, one of not eating the meat *and* staying alive. This loss differentiates the type of case being considered from what we take to be the norm of action.

In addition to invoking the unmoved-mover principle, Aristotle works with what might be termed a *proper relationship principle*. According to this principle, an act is voluntary and an agent responsible if he or she has the right kind of relationship to the outcome. To see whether there is the right kind of relationship, we review the kinds of considerations social practice suggests as relevant. To take the two already mentioned, we can say that a person who acts out of ignorance, or a person who acts as a result of a threat that is not deserved, is not in the proper relationship to the outcome. We cannot draw the normal inferences about an individual's character when he or she acts as a result of a threat or acts in ignorance. A given bit of behavior performed under these circumstances reflects differently on the agent than that behavior would if the circumstances were normal.

Aristotle points out that we differentiate behavior that seems amenable to encouragement and behavior that does not seem so amenable. Roughly, the former is coextensive with the voluntary. However, Aristotle also acknowledges that people become fixed in their ways: Both the disciplined and the self-indulgent person may no longer be able to restructure their ways of thinking and acting, even though at an earlier stage in their lives they encountered real options.

The discussion continues in Aristotle: We differentiate between someone being ugly because of a birth defect and someone becoming ugly because of slovenly habits. Since slovenly habits are something we can rectify (or could at one time have rectified), it is fitting to blame an agent for being ugly for such causes. Here Aristotle stresses

⁵ I say this realizing that there are ways to cause a person to value something that does undermine his or her relationship to the value. For a discussion of this, see my paper, "Responsibility and the problem of induced desires," *Philosophical Studies* 34 (1978), 293–301.

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that what we can deliberate about and control is what we can be held responsible for, without regarding the ultimate source of movement. This criterion of the voluntary has nothing to do with the source of the behavior being internal or external. We can deliberate over and control things even if what we are is liable to a causal history.

Aristotle rounds off his discussion by considering the extent to which people can be said to control their own moral outlook – an aspect of selves that surely colors what people will think worthwhile trying to change. If one begins corrupted, there is no internally motivated escape: The misguided person chooses to avoid change, just as a normal person accepts the need for change. Aristotle's response to this fundamental challenge to common sense and legal practice seems to be to concede the point, but maintain its irrelevance. He allows that it is not choice that determines what we take to be the ultimate goods, but a "natural gift of vision" that permits every normal person to view things in their correct perspective. This suggests that something external to, as well as independent of, us – objective norms – either resonate within us or do not. If they do, we are normal and responsible, even if we choose bad things. If the correct perspective does not resonate within us, still *we* are the ones selecting what about our character is worthwhile changing, and our choices are attributable to us. Despite differentiating two orientations to transgressions – one thinking it legitimate, the other appreciating its illegitimacy – Aristotle treats them as equally voluntary, and once identified as voluntary, as equally attributable to the agent.

Aristotle has essentially abandoned the unmoved-mover principle in favor of a position that holds one accountable for behavior if the behavior stems from one's character in a voluntary way. (This is an interpretation of the proper relationship principle mentioned above.) Here the position is that even if one's fundamental outlook (including the changes in one's outlook one will think it important to strive for) is fixed by factors over which one cannot exercise control, this does not keep one's character itself from being within one's control, because obviously one *can* make (or at least at one time could have made) changes in one's personality, even though one in fact sees no reason to. Even if an agent's behavior is ultimately caused by external factors, there can be a personal contribution to the outcome – understood in terms of identification with the principles of action – sufficient to make the behavior attributable to the agent. Voluntariness marks the domain of the responsible.

For Aristotle, even though it would be unreasonable to expect of someone, in light of his background, that he find something attractive

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about certain important values, he is still morally responsible.⁶ Although most writing on responsibility by philosophers would suggest that this view should be rejected, because having a fair opportunity to conform one's conduct to the expected standard is treated as a necessary condition of responsibility,⁷ two of the papers in this volume – Greenspan's and Morris's – argue that there is a dimension of the ordinary conception of responsibility that *is* correctly captured by this objective standard.

Maybe we should forget about what the source of human behavior is and instead focus carefully on cases in which we hold people accountable and those cases where we do not, refining if we can some distinguishing principles of our practices. Although some of the very best writing on responsibility follows just this tack, this is not an approach we can be comfortable with either. It does matter how people come to have the views and values they have, but not in a way that has been clearly articulated. This is recognized in liberal and radical political theory, and it is certainly a recurring theme in the social sciences and of late in the cognitive sciences; only to a lesser extent is it appreciated by philosophers,⁸ for whom abstract rational capacity seems to be nearly all that is required for fully responsible choice. Inquiring into how people learn and evaluate is important to our assessments of levels of accountability, but we are only at the beginning stages of sorting these things out in a way that goes beyond commonsense presumptions that are by and large uninformed by recent research. Unfortunately, some of the most imaginative literature on responsibility has suggested that we announce to the world that there is not any real problem there waiting to be solved.⁹ Compatibilism, as a philosophical position, has become complacent.

What characterizes the essays contained in this collection is that the writers are, if anything, sensitive to the subtleties of the job that lay ahead of us in coming to understand different dimensions of respon-

⁶ For a contemporary defense of the position that we are accountable for satisfying a standard even if we cannot meet it, see Robert Adams, "Involuntary sins," *Philosophical Review* 96 (1985), 3–32.

⁷ I believe most writers follow H. L. A. Hart in saying that unless one had a fair opportunity to avoid doing something forbidden, our notion of moral responsibility does not extend to that case.

Thus a primary vindication of the principle of responsibility could rest on the simple idea that unless a man has the capacity and a fair opportunity or chance to adjust his behavior to the law its penalties ought not to be applied to him. ["Punishment and the elimination of responsibility," *Punishment and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1968), p. 181]

⁸ A notable exception is Paul Feyerabend in *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1975).

⁹ Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), esp. chap. IV.

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sibility. Cognitive, emotional, motivational, cultural, and political limitations of full rational operation are not glossed over, but stressed. Locating the domain of responsible behavior is sought within these limitations, not in spite of them. Identifying the relationship between the impediments to human flourishing and the responsibility perspective is an underlying theme in many of the chapters in this book. The paradigm of a psychologically integrated and causally independent being seeking understanding is replaced by a paradigm of a socially enmeshed and rationally limited being that at any point in his or her life finds internal and external barriers on what he or she can practically think about and become.

As Aristotle observed, we do hold people accountable for their character, as well as for their behavior. We notice ourselves and others trying to do something about the kind of people we/they are and the kinds of dispositions we/they have. Some efforts at change are more successful than others. For any trait of character, we know that some people who wish to alter it succeed and others fail.

Although we know that some traits are more difficult to change than others, still it seems that for all we can tell there is little difference between some of those who succeed and some of those who do not. In this kind of situation we are tempted to say that the difference is up to the individual. We might look at it differently if all and only persons with background characteristics *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, and *E* succeeded in changing. What we find is that some who succeed have *less* going for them than some who fail, in terms of the factors that we believe promote success.

Why should the presence of background characteristics matter? If all and only people with characteristics *A–E* succeeded, it would seem as if those without any of them could not succeed, *however hard they tried*. This would mean it was not up to them to change. Changing this characteristic would not be within the power, or under the control, of those without these identified characteristics.

If *A–E* were certain kinds of characteristics over which an agent could not exercise self-control, we would agree with this assessment; but what about factors that are not background factors, such as “tries very hard to deal with personality characteristics, even entrenched ones, that are morally troublesome” that we also know to be associated with success at moral improvement? It would not surprise us if people who lacked this drive did not succeed at ameliorating problems with their own characters. Would we say that those who are complacent about themselves were at fault?

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This would depend on how we view the structure of motivational factors. If we thought that all and only persons with *X*, *Y*, and *Z* came to lack motivation, and *X*, *Y*, and *Z* were themselves factors over which an individual had no control, then we would not fault the agent for lacking drive. Alternatively, if there were no invariable and uncontrollable background pattern associated with lack of motivation, then even though the agent was not motivated, we would not regard this lack as outside the agent's control because we could not see that anything, internal or external, would stop this person from acquiring the ambition if he or she sought assiduously to acquire it. *Can* someone unmotivated assiduously seek to become highly motivated? We could think of ways in which external influences might work on someone unmotivated to make that person eventually seek to become motivated in a certain direction – but what if these environmental factors are not present?¹⁰

In fact, we have many statistically relevant factors, but few that are completely determinative of successful efforts at changing oneself. How unlikely does someone's prospects for effective change have to be, in light of certain background conditions, before we judge that this person did not have a fair opportunity to change, and consequently judge him or her less harshly than we would others?¹¹

Suppose we find out that about 70 percent of the youths in a disadvantaged neighborhood end up with a police record by the time they turn 16? Suppose further that we find out this figure is five to ten times higher than the comparable police record rate for persons brought up in middle-class neighborhoods. What are we to say morally if we want to focus on the character of people who end up in prison from this environment? It is hard to avoid concluding that the environment has influenced them more than others to engage in criminal behavior. If we inquire how it is that people learn and come to care about various things, we will have to take diverse social factors into account. We are talking about things that powerfully influence the formation of the motivational, cognitive, and moral structure of

¹⁰ The British documentary film *28UP*, directed by Michael Apted (Great Britain: Granada Productions, 1985), follows numerous children at seven-year intervals, from the time they are 7 till (at present) they are 28 years old. It is troubling as well as astounding to see the extent to which ambition in life is correlated with the early environment of these people.

¹¹ Of course, it will matter a lot in answering this question what we permit ourselves to conditionalize upon. For our purposes, we should restrict the conditions we can conditionalize on to factors that are background factors, meaning not ones the agent can or at one time could control.

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personality. Patently, more stands in the way of these people ending up with a responsible and constructive approach to life than stands in the way of others. Given these impediments, how can we blame people who end up with less responsible attitudes if we can attribute much of their character to socially corrupting forces?¹²

When we think about the past, we recognize the moral relevance of socialization. We think advocates of slavery, racism, and sexism to be more objectionable in our surroundings than in some previous times, and more so in some contemporary societies than in others. We would think worse of someone who actively opposed integration of schools today than we would someone similarly active fifty years ago. It is not because we have access to relevant facts today that people previously lacked; rather, there are gestalt differences in how we and they put things together. This is so despite the fact that many people back then saw it as we do today and that some today see it as people then did. This last acknowledgment shows that when we judge our predecessors less harshly than our contemporaries we are not basing our evaluation on what we regard as possible, but on what we regard as feasible, given what we know about how people learn and perceive. To take another example of our practical dealings with this topic, we know that people trying to deal with addictions will more likely succeed in supportive environments than in environments that encourage them to revert to old patterns. The differences between the two environments are not informational, but motivational. Even as we think about ourselves as academics, we want to be in certain kinds of settings because we think we might really become better philosophers in some contexts than in others. We think this even though we are aware there are souls who would not be kept from their theoretical potential by hostile surroundings.

There is a problem, though, in assessing which factors effectively impede moral development to the extent that they can be treated as mitigating. Philosophers, like others, tend to be largely a prioristic about what they think influences people and to what extent. Some of the recent work in attribution theory points to this tendency in assessing others. People may not be good judges about what influences them, how the influences work, and how difficult some of these influences can be to counteract. To the extent that common sense wrongly assesses these factors, common sense will result in mistaken judgments. How should we come to judge what it is fair and reasonable to

¹² For an illuminating discussion of the issues socialization and deprivation raise for a theory of responsibility, see Jeffrie Murphy, "Marxism and retribution," in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1974), 217–43.

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expect of individuals? This question obviously relates four central and interrelated issues in the domain of responsibility:

1. What sense can be made of holding people responsible for themselves, for their basic character?
2. How do our theories of character and our theories of excuses inform one another?
3. What can we learn from the social sciences about how judgments are made and how values are adopted that inform our attributional practices?
4. What range of emotionally charged reactions – including judgments – to human shortcomings, whether or not avoidable, makes conceptual and moral sense?

I now turn to the chapters that make up this anthology. In Chapter 2, “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” **Harry Frankfurt** tackles one of the most stubborn and pressing problems that arises in thinking about responsibility for character: In what sense can we be responsible for ourselves when we at any point find ourselves with values and habits that dispose us to certain ways of viewing what we might become? Isn’t what we want to become biased by what we are? And if so, how can we be responsible for the way we develop our character? Are we not just acting out a program that has been imprinted on us, but that does not really stem from us?

Frankfurt distinguishes simply *having* a value, on the one hand, and *identifying* with the value, on the other. This distinction is important for Frankfurt because he is trying to show how one can have a higher-order desire that reflects oneself as a responsible agent, and not just as a being structured by an arbitrary and ordered set of desires. One of the roles of introducing higher-order desires for Frankfurt is to provide an agent with a basis of evaluation for the particular first-order concerns that agent finds himself or herself with. But even with higher-order desires furnished, one can wonder whether the higher-order desires are not analogously arbitrary parts of our psychic structure. Frankfurt wants to address this question by showing how our relationship to these higher-order desires can involve our activity as agents, and not just reflect our embodiment of some arbitrarily given set of concerns.¹³

¹³ See Frankfurt, “Freedom of the will and the concept of a person,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971), 5–20, and Gary Watson, “Free agency,” *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975), 205–20. Both papers are reprinted in Gary Watson, *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), and in John M. Fischer, *Moral Responsibility* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

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What is to be shown is that making a commitment to a value consists in more than a refusal or unwillingness to question the value at a higher level. Frankfurt uses the analogy of doing a calculation, displaying different attitudes toward the outcome, to clarify the distinction in relationships to desires. One can just quit after a calculation, not really caring much if one's result is correct; alternatively, one can labor over a result, working it out in different ways to detect blunders. If the person checks and rechecks the result and it comes out the same, accepting this answer is accepting it for a reason and it is doing so with some assurance that however often he or she were to recheck it, the outcome would coincide with the result obtained already. Terminating the sequence of checks and accepting the outcome as correct as a result of this process precludes the charge that our acceptance of the result is arbitrary.

Frankfurt argues that committing oneself to a higher-order desire is analogous to this process of checking and rechecking a result. When a person decides to accept a desire as his own, after consideration, he does not hold himself apart from the value, but makes it fully his own. In accepting the value after consideration one is not choosing arbitrarily; one's acceptance is based on a reason. In this process one identifies with this value, and if it does not conflict with other values one holds, then the person's relationship to the value is said to be wholehearted. The value embraced in this fashion is not just to be seen as something that happens to an agent, but as something a person does. The procedures of ordering and rejecting values are the processes by which one creates an integrated self out of the raw materials of inner life. The emphasis here is not with the origin of the desire, but with the agent's taking responsibility for it through the process of integration and rejection. Our relationship to our values need not be limited to just finding ourselves embodying them. Our values may represent the result of an inquiring and evaluative process that resonates at every higher level.

Susan Wolf also seeks a way of distinguishing the responsible from the nonresponsible agent, but does so in a way that does not presuppose that we are positioned to make choices at the most fundamental level of our being. In Chapter 3, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility," Wolf argues that the mundane recognition that sanity is a condition of responsibility has important implications for theories of responsibility. What is an impossible requirement of some standard accounts of responsibility – that the agent be able to self-create – is to be replaced by a considerably weaker thesis – that the agent be sane.

Wolf begins her discussion with a review of a line of analysis accord-