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Excerpt

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## Introduction

### *Distracted by Calculation*

In the middle of “Politics as a Vocation” Max Weber turns his attention to the question of how ethics can inflect politics without becoming moralizing. He begins by noting how “Ethics can sometimes make its appearance in what is morally (*sittlich*) a highly unfortunate role.” By way of illustration he presents “the case of a man whose affections have turned away from one woman to another”:

He will be an unusual man if he does not experience the need to justify this to himself by saying, “She was not worthy of my love” or “She has disappointed me” or by coming up with other “reasons” of a similar sort. This is a highly unchivalrous reaction to the blunt reality that he no longer loves her and that she must put up with that. Even more unchivalrously, he goes on to invent a “legitimacy” that enables him to put himself in the right and add to her misfortune by trying to put her in the wrong.<sup>1</sup>

This unchivalrous man, whom we perhaps all too easily recognize, desires to balance the moral books. He takes a bookkeeping approach to his responsibility and wants to make sure that vis-à-vis his ex-love he is not in a situation of owing or indebtedness. Her suffering must be justified by her own guilt. The books must be balanced and he must be debt-free before he begins a new joint venture. Here I elaborate beyond Weber’s explicit text, but I stay true to what he is describing. I am drawing out the approach to responsibility that underlies the fickle lover’s justifications and which, as I will show later, Weber critiques over the course of “Politics as a Vocation.” From this intimate scenario, Weber moves on to more overtly political examples. With regard to parties to a past war, he argues that insofar as they immerse themselves in the allocation of “past guilt (*Schuld*)” for the start of the war, they distract themselves from their “responsibility for the *future*” and also efface the blunt reality of the “*objective* (*sachlichen*) interests that were at stake” in the war.<sup>2</sup> Writing in the aftermath of Germany’s defeat in World War I, he decries victors who, after a war, claim that they won because they were “in the right.”<sup>3</sup> That is, they take their victory

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as a sign of moral superiority, presumably because they believe in a universe that recognizes and rewards moral action, and ensures a balancing of the moral books. Further along in “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber calls this kind of belief “cosmic ethical rationalism.”<sup>4</sup>

In his passage about lovers and fighters, Weber raises the phenomenon I call “calculable responsibility” and which is the subject of this book. Calculable responsibility is a particular way of approaching human responsibility, one that I argue is especially insistent and is part of our ordinary way of articulating and discussing our responsibility. This view takes human responsibility as something amenable to calculation – as a series of debts that can be identified in advance, reckoned up, negotiated, balanced out, and discharged. A common move in calculable responsibility is to find some metric – for example, dollars, hours of work, number of casualties – to enable calculation. Indeed, specifiable guilt or fault itself can sometimes be the direct medium of our reckoning up and discharging. Weber’s fickle lover seeks some fault in the forsaken love to offset his infidelity. As we have seen in Weber’s examples, the calculable approach to responsibility may also include the expectation that the world itself works or should work in synch with moral accounting. Rewards do or should follow from moral goodness. Failures or misfortune do or should follow from moral shortcomings.

My claim is that although our responsibility, as we experience it, resists reduction to a series of calculable debts, we are forever tempted by such a reduction. This insistent presentation of responsibility in terms of calculable debts is not something of which we are necessarily self-aware even as it shapes how we understand our responsibility. Yet calculable responsibility has far-reaching effects. It is not only a view of responsibility, but also a way of seeing ourselves and our world in which we focus upon what is amenable to specification, quantification, balancing out, and discharge. As an overarching way of seeing, calculable responsibility curbs our attention and can actually render us unresponsive to our world and thereby irresponsible. As Weber tells it, and as I describe in Chapter 6, manifestations of calculable responsibility in politics can be simply terrifying. What might be a mildly amusing, if not embarrassing, reflex of fickle lovers has grave consequences in political life.

Over the course of this book, I seek to show how calculable responsibility is part of our ordinary view of our responsibility and how it belongs to what we call morality – our main way of articulating our responsibilities. I also hope to show how morality, through its calculable responsibility frame, can actually distract us from the fullness of our responsibility. Through morality we absorb ourselves in the activity of calculating our responsibilities in search of a more or less definitive settling of accounts. We distract ourselves from the less predictable, less neat, undischARGEABLE and more onerous aspects of our responsibility. I argue, moreover, that morality’s calculative view of responsibility is at the heart of that perversion of morality called “moralism”: a petty, vengeful, simplifying, overly inflexible approach to

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responsibility. I bring these insights about calculable responsibility, morality, and moralism to bear on the question of the relation of ethics to politics. Weber calls this the question of the “*ethos*” befitting politics.<sup>5</sup> What ethical bearing should we, as citizens, leaders, or other participants, bring to politics? In particular, how can we be responsible in politics without being moralistic?

We often view our moral duties as burdens. Therefore it is somewhat counterintuitive to think of our moral diligence as distracting from or skirting more difficult tasks. So let me do some more work to lay out the phenomenon of calculable responsibility in a preliminary, pre-philosophical manner. First, I want to consider two simple examples of calculable responsibility to make clear how moral diligence can be a way of avoiding responsibility. Carbon-offset<sup>6</sup> programs claim to address the problem of global warming. They offer participants the chance to cancel out the carbon emissions of their activities by funding projects that remove equivalent amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, such as planting an appropriate number of trees. Participants focus on the metric of their “carbon footprint” and work to minimize this footprint. By reducing contributions to global warming to a series of debts that can be identified in advance, reckoned up, balanced out, and discharged, carbon offset programs even offer the promise of complete carbon neutrality.<sup>7</sup> In the bid to make our responsibility calculable, carbon-offset programs assume a thorough understanding of the precise dynamics of global warming – an understanding even climatologists disavow.<sup>8</sup> But more importantly, by presenting environmental stewardship as a series of calculable debts, carbon-offset programs discourage us from asking larger questions about the kinds of lives we lead that necessitate these programs to begin with. We don’t ask about how our purchase of airline tickets together with carbon offsets continues to perpetuate an airline industry and a level of airline travel that many would say is unsustainable if we are serious about addressing global warming. By keeping us pre-occupied with our carbon footprint these programs distract us from inquiring into the underlying causes of global warming beyond the question of pounds of carbon in the atmosphere. We don’t ask about the consumerism that drives up carbon emissions. Rather, we take a consumerist solution to a problem of consumerism. Asking such broader questions would require us to reexamine and possibly transform the details of our everyday existence. But carbon-offset programs save us the burden of such inquiry and revision. Indeed, if we have the money, carbon-offset programs allow us to “do our part for the environment” without significantly changing our lifestyles. This calculable approach to responsibility conceals the more open-ended and possibly transformative dimensions of our environmental stewardship.

Another example of a calculable approach to responsibility is found in the current debate around the United States’ “debt crisis.” Members of both mainstream political parties cast the large federal debt as problematic not only for long-term economic reasons but also for moral ones. Our debt is “imposing

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an unfair burden on future generations.” Moreover, undischarged debt is itself “immoral.” As David Graeber has recently pointed out, the view that all debts should be discharged is a particularly insistent one.<sup>9</sup> The imperative to pay debts is evident in reluctance to countenance debt even when that debt is beneficial. Many economists argue that economic revival depends on more, rather than less, spending. In this way, they say, the federal debt is different, in its economic implications, from household debt. Focusing on deficit reduction “as an end in itself” could have dire consequences for the economy.<sup>10</sup> These economists argue that “moralizing” about the federal debt actually serves to obscure the economic realities at hand.

I venture that the attractiveness and urgency of the federal debt as an object of moral and political concern is further enhanced by the fact that it is especially calculable – a dollar amount can be affixed to the federal debt. The quantifiability of the federal debt gives it priority over less quantifiable debts, say what we as a society owe to those floundering in the present economic climate. The priority that quantifiability gives the federal debt may arise from the fact that quantifiability makes the debt seem masterable – we can do something about it or at least more easily monitor our progress in discharging it. The more calculable a debt, the more manageable our responsibility appears. Although economists who question the moralization of the federal debt recognize that this view can lead to political irresponsibility, economics as a discipline has done much to aid the calculable view of responsibility.

The preceding examples approach caricature. They imply it is easy to be against calculable responsibility and its simplifications. However, we all often depend on some kind of metric to help us cope with our responsibilities – to render them fungible, comparable, and so manageable. It is common to negotiate the demands of work and home life using a metric based on time: I will spend three days on this task and then two days on that other task. These are the allocated days after which my responsibilities must be considered discharged. Or work stays within “9 to 5” and any time after 5 is for commitments and pleasures other than work. Here is a way to manage responsibility (and guilt). When we speak of “work–life balance” we assume the possibility of comparable weights assigned to the different parts of our lives.

But calculable responsibility is not simply a coping mechanism for our day-to-day burdens. It also provides a way of paying attention and a way of keeping track of whether we are paying attention.<sup>11</sup> Allocating a certain number of hours for the different parts of our lives creates spaces for dedicated attention to different tasks. Taking stock of how many hours we give to each part of our lives can help us gauge whether we are paying adequate attention to all of them.

Calculable responsibility can also appeal to a particular sense of justice, understood as the equal or proportionately equal sharing of burdens among parties to a shared venture. Viewing our responsibilities as a series of debts that

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can be identified in advance, reckoned up, negotiated, balanced out, and more or less discharged facilitates a kind of bookkeeping whereby we can monitor our own and others' fulfillment of responsibilities. Such bookkeeping can be a powerful tool in maintaining justice in all manner of relations from our intimate partnerships (consider the division of labor in a household or shared parenting responsibilities) to the workplace and other collaborative and communal settings. Although our "calculations" of our own contributions in comparison to the contributions of others may be incorrect, calculating responsibility appears to us – and to a certain extent may be – a defense against exploitation or, at the very least, against being taken for granted.

We gravitate toward calculable responsibility but we also find an overly careful keeping of accounts unseemly or troubling, or indicative of a lack of human warmth and passion.<sup>12</sup> Further, an overemphasis on bookkeeping can be a sign of breakdown in a bond. A relationship may be fair on the surface but lack an inner cohesion. For example, there may be an equal division and assignment of responsibilities between each party but no genuine *sharing* of responsibility. There may be no sense of being part of and caring for a *shared* venture or – better still – adventure. And, although it is difficult to shake the feeling that an initial balancing of the books is a precondition for repair or revival of a bond, an overemphasis on bookkeeping (who contributed what, who wronged whom, etc.) can surely inhibit the effort. Even if a relationship does not reach a crisis point, a matrix of calculable responsibility always works subtly to foreclose or ignore unique, unexpected, and less quantifiable contributions; to efface differences that make a partner unable to contribute in standardized way; and to make it less likely that more idiosyncratic or tailored arrangements for the shared venture are given a chance. Sometimes we can be so focused on what somebody should have done or should do according to the established expectations (the duties scripted and specified in advance) that we do not see what they actually could have done, did do, or might do.

The everydayness, respectability, and some of the drawbacks of calculable responsibility should be emerging from our discussion so far. Although thinking about responsibility as a series of calculable debts can degenerate into pettifogging, within limits and as *one* way of considering responsibility, calculable responsibility is helpful. The problem is that calculable responsibility is often our default way of thinking about responsibility. It has an obviousness and insistence to it that makes it hard to remember that it is but one way – not the only way – of approaching responsibility. Because calculable responsibility has blessings and losses, I ultimately argue for a political ethos that both gives calculable responsibility its place and strives to keep it in its place.

## OUR ORDINARY AND EXTRA-ORDINARY RESPONSIBILITY

I elaborate and explore the phenomenon of calculable responsibility by uncovering a surprising point of coincidence in the thought of Plato, Kant,

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Nietzsche, Weber, and Heidegger. These thinkers differ on the nature and status of *morality* but, I argue, share a crucial thread in their treatments of *responsibility*. They say calculable responsibility is a pivotal and overlooked aspect of our everyday relation to responsibility. Calculable responsibility's prism of discrete and exhaustible duties or debts only illuminates what is amenable to calculation and so prematurely circumscribes what reaches our attention. As a diminished form of attention to the world, calculable responsibility obscures the more open-ended dimensions of our world and our responsibility.

Most importantly, calculable responsibility conceals the inexhaustible responsibility constitutive of being human. Though each thinker understands our "constitutive responsibility" differently, I argue that they each give it the form of an ongoing "call" to pay attention to our world and our place within it. This constitutive responsibility cannot be specified in advance, reckoned up, or discharged. They also agree that it is actually rare for us to respond to the constitutive call to attentiveness and that such a response requires nothing short of a transfiguration or conversion. In other words, it is extraordinary for us to rise to the responsibility constitutive of our humanity. Ordinarily we distract ourselves from the burden of our humanity by seeking more certain knowledge of dischargeable duties. Our epistemological preoccupation allows us to evade the challenge – but also the freedom – involved in confronting our ontological condition. Finally, they say, when we embrace our constitutive responsibility we become more attentive to the world and are thereby more responsible, though (importantly) our understanding of responsibility is itself altered.

By exploring the ways in which our constitutive responsibility is obscured by a calculative approach to responsibility, am I presenting a view of human beings as rational calculators? In a sense, yes. But more profoundly, no. Being a calculator is a mode of life, with a particular attunement or mood, which we slip into as a matter of course; but it is not the only orientation to the world that belongs to us. My claim – one that I believe finds support in the thinkers surveyed – is that we are susceptible to the belief that responsibility is calculable because it gives us a sense of control over our lives. Calculable responsibility is one of the ways – a crucial way – that we refuse or flee from our finitude and also from the enormity of our freedom. When we privilege the calculable view of responsibility we tend not to appreciate the myriad ways our lives and our actions do not conform to calculable responsibility. We neglect the extent to which relationships even beyond our relations with our intimates are also comprehensible through a gift framework or one of indeterminate reciprocity (we expect something in exchange but not necessarily the equivalent of what we have given and not within some specific time period). Put differently, to take a calculative view is more often than not to step outside a relation rather than stay within it. When we look at a relationship from the outside we are more likely to describe it in terms of a negotiation and calculation of interests,

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but this external view often falls short of our internal view when we properly inhabit these relationships. So on my understanding the picture of human beings as rational calculators is not an inaccurate one but nor does it capture us in our entirety.

The conversion narratives offered by Plato, Kant, Nietzsche, Weber, and Heidegger depict the sway of calculable responsibility and the possibilities of leaving the thrall of calculable responsibility. I draw on these conversion narratives to identify and elaborate the phenomenon of calculable responsibility and what it conceals (namely, the incalculable dimensions of our world and our responsibility, including the responsibility constitutive of our humanity); show how calculable responsibility belongs to morality and underlies the dynamic of moralism; explore what it takes to leave the thrall of calculable responsibility (a conversion of sorts) and embrace the incalculable dimensions of responsibility; and consider how we are to relate to morality (and moralism) given that calculable responsibility is both ineradicable and linked to some of our basic notions of justice and therefore cannot and should not be entirely left behind. In undertaking these tasks I identify a persistent, but hitherto unnoticed, theme in the history of philosophy. Given the lessons from these conversion narratives, I ask what kind of orientation or bearing toward politics might be our best answer to the constant pull of moralism. All the thinkers in this book pay sustained attention to the ineradicable presence of calculable responsibility and the way it seeks to narrow our responsibility. They thereby suggest (either explicitly or implicitly by their example) that careful watchfulness of the way calculable responsibility always seeks to be the last word on our responsibility is a crucial element in leaving the thrall of calculable responsibility.

I have called this study *Extraordinary Responsibility: Politics beyond the Moral Calculus*. By “extraordinary” I have in mind those incalculable aspects of our responsibility that are effaced by calculable responsibility, as an ordinary and often the default mode for thinking about our responsibilities. I seek to articulate how we might orient ourselves to politics such that we do not allow morality’s moralizing calculus to exhaust our responsibility. I also use the word “extraordinary” because these thinkers suggest that it can take an extraordinary event to bring us before the ordinarily concealed aspects of our responsibility. So by appeal to an extraordinary responsibility, I am not referring to or valorizing a responsibility that is exceptional or that arises only in a state of emergency. Rather I am pointing to the kinds of responsibility that are always present but that are ordinarily concealed by the calculable responsibility framework. It is true that many aspects of political life are predictable and regular and so a calculative framework for responsibility might be appropriate. However, what I am trying to suggest is that our framework for viewing responsibility may make our political life appear more predictable than it is and may be a way we insulate ourselves from aspects of political life that are unforeseeable and unscripted and require our ongoing attention. I accept the regularities of political life; some of these are the achievement of the rule of



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law. The problem occurs when our way of describing our responsibilities to ourselves actually serves to efface the extent of our responsibility and invites us to avoid it.

As mentioned, I do not deny that in our intimate and other relations we are always taking on – often inadvertently – incalculable responsibilities and benefiting from others doing the same. At the same time, though, I have argued that we have a habit of understanding our responsibilities as calculable. This propensity is most manifest when circumstances demand that we think about, deliberate over, explain or explicitly articulate our responsibilities. Indeed, we may especially gravitate toward calculable responsibility when we fear the enormity of the responsibility confronting us. So friends often comfort friends, who are troubled by some great feeling of responsibility for a situation, by assuring them that vis-à-vis that situation they have discharged or balanced-out this or that identifiable debt. One of my purposes in this book is to question this kind of comfort and the tendency of thought it exemplifies. My concern is the worrisome ways calculable responsibility can work to conceal what we see of the world and our responsibility.

#### WHAT IS RESPONSIBILITY?

“Responsibility,” as used in this book, refers to certain demands upon us that require a response. The requisite nature of these demands depends on a binding claim that is somehow different from force, habit, and interest (though it may coincide with them). Here it is helpful to note “responsible” has the sense of “to be answerable.” Its etymology reaches to the Latin “*responsus*,” the past participle of “*respondere*”: “to respond,” “to answer, to reply to,” as well as “to promise in return,” “to match, balance, correspond to, be equal to, resemble, measure up to.” “*Respondere*” comes from “*re-*” (“back”) plus “*spondere*” (“to promise solemnly, pledge, vow”). Responsibility, then, includes an understanding of the compelling demands upon us in terms of debts owed *and* also an understanding of these demands as requests for a response. I find the connection between responsibility and responsiveness<sup>13</sup> to be crucial to a claim I make in this book: to be responsible is to be responsive. Or, as I will often put it, to be responsible is to be attentive – to attend properly to the situation at hand.

Understood in this way, responsibility both encompasses and moves beyond all that usually goes by the name of ethics, morality, and obligation. Some scholars try to make a distinction between “morality” and “obligation,”<sup>14</sup> on the one hand, and “ethical” concerns, on the other, in part because of morality’s excessive reliance on rules, claim to universality and systemic consistency, and devaluation of what falls outside its understanding of rationality<sup>15</sup> (more on this shortly). These scholars attempt to speak of the “ethical” as a broad category of which “morality” is a narrow aspect. Other scholars attribute an excessive “ruliness” to “the ethical” as well.<sup>16</sup> Generally, I use “ethical” to refer to all



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that pertains to the overarching category of “responsibility.” I use “morality” to refer to an approach to responsibility that bears the mark of calculable responsibility (and I take morality to be present in our ordinary approach to responsibility). When exegesis requires strict terminology, as is the case with Kant’s thought, I make that clear.

As I use the term, “responsibility” is not confined to the demands for response that arise from our being, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the cause of some state of affairs.<sup>17</sup> Instead, situations can demand a response from us even though we have nothing whatsoever to do with their genesis. Nor is responsibility, as I use it, confined to responsiveness to other human beings in the way “ethics” is often confined. See, for example, Bernard Williams’s initial definition of the ethical in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*: “we have a conception of the ethical that understandably relates to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires, and, generally, the lives of other people.”<sup>18</sup> Occasionally I use “the ethical” or “ethics” in this limited sense as that part of responsibility specifically pertaining to how we treat other human beings and what we owe them (ethics in this sense can include morality and also refer to other-directed dispositions). In this book, I maintain that our responsibility also extends to responsiveness to the world and our place within it. Our responsiveness to the world, is of course, always implicated in our responsiveness to other human beings, but it extends beyond human relations. Some of the thinkers I survey suggest that a focus on human relations alone – at the expense of a broader attentiveness to an unfolding world – can invite a narrowing of responsibility to a series of specifiable and dischargeable debts.

Sometimes when I speak of “responsibility” I am speaking of this or that specific responsibility, or of the entire terrain that includes all such responsibilities. At other points, I am speaking of the essence of responsibility – namely what gives particular responsibilities their character as responsibilities. In this special sense “responsibility” refers to the possibility of being bound by a particular responsibility in the first place. When the thinkers in this study consider the ordinarily concealed responsibility constitutive of our humanity they are grappling with this possibility – with what it is to be human such that we can have responsibilities at all.

## MORALITY AND MORALISM AS CALCULABLE RESPONSIBILITY

Now that I have offered an initial sketch of the senses of “responsibility” in this book, I want to offer some orienting thoughts on the word “calculable.” Thinking about the senses of the word “calculable” can provide a preliminary illumination of how calculable responsibility invites a kind of inattentiveness. To calculate can have the sense of to “estimate or determine by arithmetical or mathematical reckoning.” Accordingly, we use the word calculable to describe what is “capable of being calculated” – what is able to be “measured,” “reckoned,” or “computed.” But to calculate can also refer to thinking more

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generally: to “estimate or determine by practical judgement or on the basis of experience.”<sup>19</sup> A similar link between thinking and calculation can be found in the word “ponder.” “Ponder” includes the senses “to weigh,” “to ascertain the weight of,” and also “to consider carefully,” “to think about,” and “to meditate upon.”<sup>20</sup> The two senses of “calculate” (and “ponder”) speak to a central concern of this book: the extent to which calculation (in the sense of a reckoning up) comes to stand for thinking and thoughtfulness more generally. The problem with calculation is that it tends not to attend to the world as it is and unfolds but, rather, as it can be predicted and mastered. This kind of thinking is evident in some of the additional senses of calculate, such as to “ascertain beforehand the time or circumstances of an event ... by mathematics”; to “plan or devise with forethought; to think out, to frame”; and to “arrange, design, adjust, adapt, or fit for a purpose.”<sup>21</sup>

As I understand it, calculable responsibility involves a set of assumptions about responsibility that render it masterable. Responsibility is understood as something that can be identified in advance, specified, reckoned up, negotiated and balanced out, and discharged. That is, in the paradigm of calculable responsibility we expect that our responsibilities are to some extent predictable; that they are to some extent specifiable and so can assume the form of relatively discrete tasks; that they are amenable to some metric such that they are to some extent quantifiable and so can be tallied up and weighed against one another; that these relatively discrete and measurable responsibilities are amenable to our ordering such that we can divide them up, reallocate them in some economy of responsibility between ourselves and others, or engage in a process of offsetting them (e.g., balancing different responsibilities against one another such that taking on a particular task can allow one to avoid another task); and that they can in principle be discharged – either through the completion of a task, reallocation, or offsetting – with minimal or no remainders.

I am not suggesting that *every* single one of these assumptions need be present for an outlook to manifest calculable responsibility at a given moment. Rather, I think a constellation of at least a few of these assumptions (each in *varying* degrees of intensity) often presents itself to us when we attend to our responsibilities and marks the belief or hope that our responsibility is masterable. For example, it might be that we did *not* foresee a particular responsibility in advance and we accept the surprise of that responsibility, but *now* we seek to manage that responsibility by reducing it to specifiable tasks and seek to negotiate and balance out the responsibility and ultimately discharge it.

The adjective “calculable” carries a sense that is perhaps in lesser use now but helps to capture a crucial aspect of the phenomenon of calculable responsibility. Calculable can also have the sense of “that may be counted on: dependable.”<sup>22</sup> It could describe one whose “action in given circumstances can be reckoned upon and estimated.” Of an undependable man English usage once