

# Moral Responsibility—What Is It, and Who Cares?

Kenton Machina

(From a draft textbook. Not for circulation or public citation. Copyright retained by Kenton Machina.)

## I. Basic concepts

### *A Common Sense Orientation*

If you have a little brother or sister—or a good memory of your own childhood—surely you know the excuses: “Bobby made me do it.” “How was I supposed to know it would break?” “I couldn’t help it—she pushed me!”

These are all attempts to avoid blame when something has gone wrong. These are all attempts at avoiding something called “moral responsibility.” (At least that is what philosophers and others who write on this subject call it.) In this “Orientation” section I am going to talk about moral responsibility in a normal sort of way, not raising any deep philosophical objections or questions. The point is to get familiar with the ordinary ways this important concept operates, in order to get clearer about what it amounts to. So, let’s return to the simple examples with which we began.

“Bobby made me do it” tries to place the moral responsibility on Bobby, even though I did it. An interesting ploy. Even though I did it, Bobby somehow was the one who was really in control and thus should bear the blame, according to me. On the other hand, “How was I supposed to know it would break?” admits that I broke it, but attempts to get out of being morally responsible for the damage by pleading ignorance. Apparently, if I am sufficiently ignorant, I can avoid being responsible. On the other hand, “I couldn’t help knocking you down—she pushed me” suggests that even though my body knocked you down, I really wasn’t responsible, since my body was caused to move by someone else. That other person, presumably, should be the one blamed, not me.

In these examples, moral responsibility is tied to properly placing the blame for something bad. And so moral responsibility is something that the child might well seek to avoid. It’s not hard to see that both adults and children make excuses like these, to avoid responsibility for bad things, all the time. Blame someone else. Plead ignorance. “I didn’t mean to do it,” “I couldn’t help it.” “I didn’t know,” and so on. The aim is to escape from being thought *morally responsible* for the bad thing.

Not everyone tries to escape from moral responsibility when they have been involved in something bad. There are those with strength of character who “own up” to their responsibility, admit it, and perhaps try to set things right. Many admire such people, thinking them mature and worthy of respect, but others think they are foolish to be so honest. In fact, there are some folks who seem all too willing to be morally responsible for some bad happening even when it was not in fact their fault. These guilt-ridden individuals blame themselves for things they had no way to avoid, or for things that they actually did not do. We probably think such people have “issues,” and

we see such a trait as a character flaw. Nevertheless, at some time or other perhaps just about everyone behaves in this way. Haven't you ever felt guilt about something that you really could not have avoided or controlled?

At this point, you should be getting a feel for what moral responsibility is all about. However, the examples we have been looking at are seriously one-sided—having to do with whether or not someone should be blamed for doing something bad. Moral responsibility is *not* just about fixing the blame for bad occurrences. It is equally about deserving praise for *good* results. So, let's pay attention to some positive events for a while, to balance out all the negativity we've been talking about so far. That will create a much more balanced picture.

There are dramatic examples—the firefighter who enters the burning building to save a child from otherwise-certain death. There are everyday examples—the employee who puts forward a little extra effort to double-check her work, thus catching an error that would have caused a bit of damage to the company. The romantic partner who controls his temper and thereby converts a potentially volatile situation into an opportunity for growing the relationship. The friend who has the character to forgive a past offense, when the circumstances are appropriate. In each of these cases, someone, it seems, is *responsible* for having done something good. Examples like these remind us that responsibility is not just about guilt and blame, but also about virtue and praise.

When it comes to things like praise, of course, it is much less common to find people running away from being recognized as the responsible party. “How was I supposed to know things would turn out this well?” doesn't sound like a typical response to praise. Still, it really does make sense *sometimes* to think “I really don't deserve to be praised for this, since it was just a lucky accident that everything worked out great.” *Sometimes*, if I am completely honest with myself, I would have to admit that “Bobby made me do it” even though I am getting all the credit. Praise can be misplaced, or undeserved, just as blame can.

It is important to notice that moral responsibility relates to being praiseworthy as well as to being blameworthy, because often people inaccurately tend to think of responsibility solely as some sort of burden to be avoided. If moral responsibility were only associated with getting you set up to be blamed for something, you might well say that you want nothing to do with it. However, now we see that eliminating the idea of moral responsibility would not only result in eliminating deserved blame, but also in lack of deserved praise—perhaps a lack of moral respect.

I think the notion of moral responsibility is even more important in our lives and in how we think of ourselves and each other than has so far become apparent, but discussion of that will have to wait, for we have already come far enough for you to be oriented to the subject of moral responsibility. It's time to start probing the concept a little more carefully and precisely.

### ***What exactly is moral responsibility?***

It should be obvious by now that there is a link between moral responsibility and accurately directed, deserved moral praise or blame. Let's start with these ideas and see what we can do with them.

The first thing to notice is that a person could be morally responsible for something even though no one recognizes it. That is, being morally responsible for some bad thing or some wonderful thing isn't the same thing as being *actually* blamed or *actually* praised. If no one knows what a great thing you did (even you yourself do not recognize it as being a wonderful thing), no one (not even you) will praise you for it, but you might still be the one who is responsible for it. You *deserve* praise, perhaps, but you do not get any, not even from yourself.

Similarly, people sometimes get praised or blamed for things they clearly are *not* responsible for. All sorts of mistakes are possible in this regard. The guilty sometimes get off, while the innocent get blamed. The virtuous are sometimes vilified, while the guilty are praised. Everyone knows this. Innocent people are convicted by biased or sloppy juries, while tyrants and con artists fool people into seeing them as heroes.

The lesson here is that we should be careful not to confuse a) a person's being morally responsible for something with b) that person's being actually praised or blamed for that thing. Instead, we perhaps should think of moral responsibility as the *basis* for *accurate* or *deserved* praise and blame of a person. That is, when you are *truly* morally responsible for doing something good, that would mean you *deserve* praise for it, even though you might not actually get the praise you deserve. Similarly, for when you are responsible for doing something bad. (Except in that case you deserve blame.)

So far, so good. But now notice that praising and blaming sometimes have little or nothing to do with morality. Someone might see a magnificent sunset and *praise* its beauty. This seems not to be connected to morality in any way, even though praising is going on. The sunset isn't morally good, no matter how beautiful it may be. Or, someone might *blame* a storm for doing considerable damage to the roof. This kind of blame is not moral blame. The storm was not evil, even though it was destructive. (A "bad" storm is not immoral or naughty.) Even praising and blaming of *persons* need not be connected to morality. One might praise a person for being especially smart, especially strong, especially healthy, but these seem not to have much to do with being morally good. There is no contradiction in saying that some very smart person is morally despicable.

It should be obvious that praise and blame with no connection to morality also have no particular connection to moral responsibility. Therefore, rather than simply saying that moral responsibility provides a basis for praise and blame, we need to say something just a bit different; we need to say that moral responsibility provides the basis for *morally-connected* praising and blaming of a person.

What is meant by "morally-connected praising and blaming of a person"? Here are some examples of what I mean by this type of praising and blaming, in pairs, where the first of each pair is an example of praise and the second an example of blame:

- a) feeling proud of yourself that you did the morally right thing
- b) feeling ashamed of yourself that you gave in to temptation and did a morally bad thing
  
- a) commending someone's action for being morally good and an example to others

- b) condemning someone’s action for being morally wrong and without excuse
- a) determining that someone deserves to get public recognition for the morally great thing they did—for example, for risking their life to save someone
- b) deciding that someone deserves to be punished for what they did—for example for committing a crime

The basic idea behind morally-connected praising and blaming of a person, it seems to me, is that some actions (or perhaps even some thoughts or intentions) *reflect on a person’s moral standing*—on how good a person they are, from a moral point of view. Moral praising is a way of giving a high moral grade to someone. Moral blaming is a way of giving a low grade. In other words, moral praising and blaming of a person is a way of *evaluating* someone’s behavior or thoughts from a moral standpoint and letting that evaluation affect the person’s public moral “standing.” And when we give high marks, that means the person’s moral standing is seen as higher than it otherwise would have been; while low marks have the opposite effect.

Many who write about this topic believe that a person’s moral standing, as that phrase is being used here, is just another way of talking about what someone *deserves* with respect to moral praise or blame. This leads to a commonly-used alternative way of describing moral responsibility as moral *praiseworthiness* or *blameworthiness*.<sup>1</sup>

To clarify a bit more, look again at the examples above. The praise or blame in each case is directed at *a person*. It is you, or Joe, or Natasha, who is praised or blamed. The praise or blame we are talking about is not an evaluation of an action or a thought. It is an evaluation of a *person’s* moral standing. So, this is very different from saying things like

People ought to be brave and trustworthy, keeping their promises.  
It is a great thing when parents love their children and care for their needs.  
Sacrificing your life for the sake of a good cause is the noblest thing a person can do.

The above examples are indeed examples of morally-connected praise, but they are not examples of praising *a specific person*. Instead, they are examples of praising a type of behavior. These examples do not directly talk about anyone’s moral responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Tying moral praiseworthiness and blameworthiness to what a person deserves, based on that person’s moral standing, is by far the most common way of understanding moral responsibility. However, there are some who find the notion of “moral standing” to be objectionable, and would rather base moral praiseworthiness or blameworthiness on something else. See, for example, Marion Smiley, *Moral Responsibility and the Boundaries of Community*, (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), Chap. 8 and 9. I will ignore this dispute, and assume the common conception is correct.

<sup>2</sup>For example, here is a classic analysis of moral responsibility, from Richard Swinburne:

[G]uilt belongs to a person only in respect of his failure to perform his obligations, or his

What have we learned, then, about moral responsibility from all this discussion? It seems as though moral responsibility attaches to persons (or groups of persons), and it serves as the basis for deserving morally-connected praise and blame directed at that person or group.<sup>3</sup> Morally-connected praise and blame of a person is deserved when that person does something that reflects on his or her moral standing—that is, something that potentially affects the degree to which the person is a morally good or bad person. What a person does, no matter how significant, no matter how awful, no matter how kind, no matter how hateful, is not a basis for moral evaluation of that person unless that person is morally responsible for what they did. Someone's act or thought cannot reflect on their moral standing unless they are morally responsible for it. This is the way our common conception of moral responsibility works.

Check this out with an example. Suppose I give my hungry baby a jar of commercially-prepared baby food that has been poisoned by a malicious person trying to get even with the baby food company for some perceived injustice. I have no way of knowing the food is poisoned, but the poison is effective and my baby becomes seriously ill as a result of my actions. I poisoned my baby. Does this tragedy reflect negatively on my moral standing, showing me to be a baby-abuser? Of course not. Why? Because I am not morally responsible for making my baby sick, despite the fact that my feeding my baby was the cause of the baby's being poisoned. I do not deserve to be morally blamed for my baby's illness. Presumably, the person who deserves the blame in this case is the person who put the poison in the jar. We do evaluate the baby's being made sick by poisoning as morally bad, certainly, but the morally bad

---

doing what it is obligatory not to do, i.e., something wrong. ... Through his past failure the guilty one has acquired a negative status, somewhat like being unclean.... Both objective and subjective guilt [guilt in which I believe I have done something wrong] are stains on a soul.... Such...is the common understanding of moral guilt, the status acquired by one who fails in his obligations. (Richard Swinburne, "The Christian Scheme of Salvation," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas Morris. [Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Univ Press, 1998], 15-18.)

Extrapolating from this account to cover more positive cases as well as cases of guilt is not difficult:

A person is morally responsible for X when X makes the person morally guilty ("unclean") or morally innocent ("spotless") or even morally virtuous ("gleaming"?). That is, X has the potential to affect the person's *moral status*, the status acquired by one who exceeds, meets, or fails to meet his or her obligations.

<sup>3</sup>The idea of group responsibility is extremely important. It also raises many complex issues, such as the question whether all members of a group are equally responsible when the group is responsible. When the citizens elect a representative to Parliament or Congress, is every citizen equally responsible for the outcome? What about those who did not vote, but could have? To avoid dealing with such complexities, I will regrettably restrict this text to discussion of individual, rather than group, moral responsibility. This decision should in no way be taken to indicate that group responsibility is less central or important, but one probably should become clear about individual responsibility first.

thing does not reflect on me unless I am morally responsible for it. In this case I am sure no one would think I am morally responsible, assuming that there was no way for me to know that the food was poisoned.

This example shows how moral responsibility enters into our common thinking about moral praise and blame of persons. It also raises questions about exactly how moral responsibility is to be properly assigned. (For example, was the store negligent?) But more about that later.

Now we understand the excuse-making that was described at the start of this essay. “Bobby made me do it” is a way of my trying to escape from being evaluated negatively *as a person*. I am trying to say that *I* am not responsible for some particular morally bad thing, and so *my* own personal moral standing should not be negatively affected by the fact that I did it. Even though I did whatever it was, it should be Bobby’s moral standing, not mine, that should be negatively affected. So, this is all about evaluating the moral standing of specific individuals. Moral responsibility is the factor that is supposed to determine *which* individual’s moral standing gets affected by the evaluation.

I therefore propose we use the following summary analysis of these ideas as our definition of moral responsibility:

**A person is morally responsible for something, when that thing truly reflects on the person’s “moral standing.”**

It is commonly believed that people are morally responsible for all sorts of things all the time. That is why we praise and blame them in moral terms, in ways like those mentioned earlier, and when we do this we think that the subjects of our praise and blame are worthy or deserving recipients of it. It would be a major change in the way we think of others or of ourselves if we were to give up on the concept of moral responsibility. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, there are serious problems with the application of the concept. We will get to those problems later. So, getting clear about what is meant by moral responsibility is just the first step in our thinking process.

### ***Being a responsible person***

Social critics may make statements like these: “People these days have no sense of personal responsibility.” “No one is willing to be responsible for taking care of themselves any more.” “Young people today simply are not responsible citizens.”

What does this have to do with our discussion of moral responsibility? Are statements like these claiming that people today are not, in fact, morally responsible for anything? We need to get this cleared up before going on.

With a little thought, you should be able to see that this talk about “being a responsible person” or “having a sense of responsibility” is somewhat different from our earlier discussion of moral responsibility. Being *morally responsible for something*, as described previously, has to do with the potential for having one’s moral standing positively or negatively affected. It has nothing to do with whether that person is *willing* to be evaluated, it has nothing to do with whether such evaluation has any *effect* on the person, and it has nothing to do with whether that person sees himself or herself

as someone who *ought* to “take” responsibility. In short, it has nothing to do with what the social critic calls “being a responsible person.” One should not confuse the two ways of talking about responsibility, even though they might sound similar.

We could stop now to take the time to figure out what it means to “be a responsible person,” or to be a responsible citizen, to take responsibility for one’s own life, and so on. But that would be a major distraction, and I do not want to do it. Rather, I just want to note that by referring back to our earlier analysis of moral responsibility, we can see that **a totally “irresponsible person” who refuses to “take responsibility” for anything at all *might nevertheless be morally responsible* for their behavior, even when that behavior is “irresponsible.”**

An example may help make this stick. Imagine Sarah, an “irresponsible” roommate who can never be counted on to keep her promises or to do her share. Sarah, we suppose, is one of those “young people” who has no “sense of personal responsibility.” She never follows through, and lives from whim to whim. But none of this has anything to do with whether Sarah is ever morally responsible for anything. If Sarah can be legitimately evaluated from a moral standpoint because she fails to keep a promise, or she damages her roommate’s property through sheer negligence and then refuses to pay for it, then Sarah *is morally responsible for those things*—at least according to common morality. She will be evaluated harshly, I would imagine. If that evaluation is deserved, then Sarah must have been morally responsible for not having kept her promise, and for damaging the property without paying for the damage. The whole point of the notion of moral responsibility is that Sarah *is* morally responsible for her behavior, whether she likes it or not, whether it makes any difference to her or not. To tell the truth, Sarah’s “irresponsibility” could itself be something for which she is judged to be morally responsible, and therefore something that legitimately counts against her. When Sarah’s roommate complains in moral terms about Sarah, the roommate is assuming that Sarah *is* morally responsible for her poor behavior, even though the roommate may very well say that Sarah is a totally irresponsible person.

So, there you have it—an irresponsible person who would typically be thought to be morally responsible for their irresponsible behavior. Being morally responsible is not the same thing as being a “responsible person.”

### ***Moral responsibility is not the same as causal responsibility***

One more confusion often comes up in discussion of these matters: moral responsibility needs to be distinguished from causal responsibility.<sup>4</sup> A person is causally responsible for something when that person is an important part of the cause that brought it about. For example, if I say something to you that hurts your feelings, I am causally responsible for hurting your feelings. My behavior was important in causing you to have hurt feelings. However, if I would have had no way of knowing that your feelings would be hurt, it could very well be that I am *not* morally responsible for hurting your feelings.

Causal responsibility is defined very broadly—it doesn’t necessarily connect with moral evaluation at all. The sun’s rays can be causally responsible for making plastic

---

<sup>4</sup> Notice that the word used here is “causal,” not “casual.” “Causal” has to do with cause and effect. “Casual” has to do with relaxed style.

parts turn brittle over time. Germs may be responsible for making you sick. Lack of sleep might be responsible for a driver's falling asleep at the wheel. Being drunk might be responsible for your doing something really stupid. What is involved in all these cases is simply a cause and effect relationship between two things. There is not necessarily any connection to moral evaluation. We would not, for example, think the sun or its rays were morally bad for making the parts turn brittle. "Naughty sun" is just absurd, or a joke. Only *persons* can be morally responsible because moral responsibility has to do with moral evaluation, and only persons can be morally evaluated.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, when I am causally responsible for bringing about a negative result, or a positive result, moral responsibility may very well come into play. That is, because I caused something positive or something negative to occur, I might be subject to legitimate moral evaluation for having done so. Therefore, there is a potential connection between causal responsibility and moral responsibility when the cause of something is a person. But the concepts of the two kinds of responsibility are differently defined and they should not be confused.

Even when a person is causally responsible for something, it still doesn't automatically follow that the person is morally responsible for that thing. I was causally responsible for sickening my baby in the earlier example, since I was the one who put the poisoned food in the baby's mouth. But I am not morally responsible for making my baby ill. Moreover, I may be morally responsible for something that I did *not* cause. If I let my friend drive home drunk from the party, realizing that he is in no condition to drive, and realizing the danger, then I seem at least somewhat responsible when he gets into an accident on the way, even though I did not cause the accident.

Causal responsibility and moral responsibility may be related in various complex ways, but they are not the same thing.

### ***Holding someone responsible***

"I'm holding you accountable for this!" sounds familiar, and quite negative, or threatening. Someone might say something like this to a person they were blaming for having done something wrong. Or they might say this when assigning a challenging task to someone, with a threat of punishment or bad consequences if the task were not to be accomplished properly. This may or may not have anything to do with morality. When the boss tells the employee that she is holding him accountable, it is likely that the accountability in question is not *moral* accountability at all. But when the homeowner tells the neighbor he's accountable for the damage his dog did, it is likely that there is a moral, or even a legal, flavor to the assignment of responsibility.

Holding someone *morally* accountable seems to be mostly a matter of placing *moral* blame on them, possibly accompanied by punishment for the wrongdoing. The justification for the punishment is that the person who is to be punished is morally blameworthy. So, holding someone morally accountable amounts to thinking of them as morally responsible, probably in a negative way, and then doing something about it.

---

<sup>5</sup> Persons might not be human beings. Whether there are non-human persons is controversial. Some believe that certain higher mammals can be persons, or semi-persons. Space aliens, as depicted in various sci-fi movies, are pretty clearly persons.

The student who blames her instructor for not trying hard enough, or for being boring, or for having unreasonable standards, and who then “punishes” that instructor by complaining to all her friends, refusing to participate in class, and writing nasty comments on the end-of-course survey is holding the instructor morally accountable or responsible. The student who breaks off a friendship with another student because the second student failed to live up to a promise to help clean up the dorm room is holding the offender morally accountable or responsible. Simply heaping moral blame on someone else is a way of holding them to be morally responsible.

Now, here is the important thing to notice about all this: *being* morally responsible for something is *not* the same as being *held* accountable for it. Recall what it is to be morally responsible for something:

**A person is morally responsible for something, when that thing truly reflects on the person’s “moral standing.”**

That definition does *not* say that a person is morally responsible when someone *actually evaluates* them, or *actually holds them accountable*. A person could *be* morally responsible for something even though no one ever actually evaluates them. Also, a person could be *incorrectly* thought to be responsible, and thus incorrectly praised or blamed.

So, it is important not to confuse *holding* responsible with *being* responsible. Even if it would be very beneficial to society to hold someone accountable, to blame them or praise them, that does not mean the individual in question is truly morally responsible. One might prevent a riot by convicting an innocent person of a crime (if the public is convinced the person is guilty), but that does not mean the person is in fact morally responsible for the crime. The person may be *held* to be legally and morally responsible—which simply means that the person is treated as though responsible—without actually being responsible. Any theory of responsibility that denies this is surely mistaken.

### Quick Review

- Moral responsibility applies only to persons.
- A person is morally responsible for something when that thing reflects on the person’s moral standing.
- The following concepts are related to the concept of being morally responsible for something, but nevertheless need to be kept distinct from it because they are all different:
  - ◆ feeling morally responsible for something
  - ◆ being a morally responsible person
  - ◆ being causally responsible for something
  - ◆ being held morally responsible for something

## II. What Difference Does It Make?

Maybe it would be easier if we just stopped thinking of ourselves and others as being morally responsible. It does seem to be a complex idea, and is often hard to apply in real life cases, where we commonly find ourselves not quite sure who, if anyone, is morally responsible for doing something we do not approve of. And some people claim to find it distasteful to engage in the moral evaluating that goes along with thinking of people as morally responsible individuals. In fact, we will see later that there are some very deep reasons for being suspicious about whether people can *ever* truly be morally responsible for even one thing.

But before you go down the path to blissful simplicity without moral responsibility, it would be wise to notice just how important the notion of responsibility is within contemporary Western and Islamic cultures. We are now going to take just a little time to explore the ways that the concept of moral responsibility figures into our lives. Giving up on moral responsibility would, in fact, have enormous consequences for how almost all people within those cultural spheres think of themselves and others.<sup>6</sup> Below, I will explore just a few of these consequences—enough, I hope, to indicate the extent to which we rely on the concept of moral responsibility every day.

In order to appreciate what would be lost if we were to give up on moral responsibility, I think it would be very helpful first to survey some of what would *not* be lost. Doing this will help to keep things in perspective. Some philosophers think we would in fact not lose anything truly worth keeping, although we would have to give up many common ways of thinking.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Nonmoral evaluations***

Since moral responsibility has to do with the moral evaluation of persons, any sort of evaluation that either does not count as a *moral* evaluation, or is not an evaluation of a *person* would be unaffected by the removal of moral responsibility from our common vocabulary. This means we could continue to truthfully and sincerely express both positive and negative *nonmoral* evaluations of behavior without implying anything about moral responsibility. For example, we could say “Good job!” to an employee, or a student. “This is great! Keep it up!” does not appear to be threatened in any way by a ban on moral responsibility. “Your performance strongly indicates the need for more practice” and “This presentation was ineffective and sloppy” are similarly untouched by any move away from moral responsibility. That is, we can indicate that we strongly

---

<sup>6</sup>Detailed cross-cultural analysis of the notion of moral responsibility outside the range of Western and Islamic spheres of influence lies beyond my competence. I have modest amounts of evidence that there are similar notions about responsibility in many additional cultural milieus.

<sup>7</sup>See, for one prominent example, Bruce N. Waller, “Virtue Unrewarded: Morality without Moral Responsibility.” *Philosophia* (Israel). 31[3-4], 427-447. 2004. Or, for another, Derk Pereboom, *Living without free will*, (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

approve of some behavior, or that it is socially acceptable behavior, that we hope it will continue, that we will try to follow this example, that it had all sorts of beneficial consequences, and the like. All this is (nonmoral?) evaluation of behavior, not moral evaluation of persons.

As far as I can see, this point *might* extend even to *moral* evaluation of behavior, so long as it is evaluation of *behavior* rather than evaluation of *the person* who engaged in that behavior. However, this point of view is controversial. Is it possible to look at a bit of actual behavior and evaluate it as being morally right or wrong, without thereby morally evaluating the person who engaged in that bit of behavior? If so, then we could retain moral evaluation of behavior while giving up on moral responsibility. If not, then abolishing moral responsibility means elimination of all moral evaluation of behavior. Many observers have assumed the latter position—that is, they have assumed that once moral responsibility is eliminated, then all meaningful moral evaluation is also eliminated. Because this issue is complex, I will put it off for now and return to it a bit later, after exploring *nonmoral* evaluation somewhat further.

It is not only nonmoral evaluation of *behavior* that remains intact when moral responsibility has been eliminated. Nonmoral evaluation of *persons* similarly, and not surprisingly, also survives. Since nonmoral evaluation of persons is not moral evaluation, it basically has nothing to do with moral responsibility. For example, even without moral responsibility, we could still talk of ourselves and others in the kinds of nonmoral evaluative terms we use for talking about other mammals. We typically do not think of tigers, for example, as having good or bad morals, since we do not think of them as being capable of moral responsibility or moral reasoning. A tiger's brutality in killing its prey may be impressive or disturbing to us, but it is not thought to be evil (or good). It is simply the way of tigers. The mother tiger may gently care for her young offspring, creating nice opportunities for the nature photographer, but that hardly qualifies her as recognizing and doing her moral duty as a mother. Again, she is simply being a tiger mother, doing what comes naturally. So, we may evaluate the tiger as a gentle mother, a brutal killer, a cunning stalker, and so on. But the tiger is not morally good or bad.

By the same token, we can evaluate other people and ourselves in nonmoral terms as being intelligent, or having a good sense of humor, being physically strong or quick, and the like. Some would say we can even go so far as to describe character traits such as being a compassionate person, or being an aggressive person, that often are linked to moral evaluation, without intending these evaluations to be moral evaluations of the person. According to that viewpoint (which I happen to share) we can describe character traits that might have moral significance without thereby implying that the possessors of these traits deserve any moral praise or blame for possessing them. This approach treats character traits as purely descriptive of the person, in much the same way that one can describe the character traits of an alligator without thereby implying that the alligator is being evaluated morally. "That alligator is especially quick-tempered and aggressive" does not mean that alligator is morally evil. Similarly, to say that some person is especially quick-tempered and aggressive may be treated simply as a nonmoral description of what the person is like, with no particular implication that

the person is to be morally blamed or praised on the basis of it, or that their character makes them have a greater or lesser moral status.

So, it appears that quite a few ways of evaluating and describing persons and their behavior remain possible even without any notion of moral responsibility, even including descriptions and nonmoral evaluations of character traits and behavior that might be thought to be morally relevant. Moreover, it remains possible, even without moral responsibility, to encourage people to engage in certain kinds of behavior rather than other kinds, to be kind, to be constructive, to be cooperative, and the like. So long as there is no implication that the person deserves moral praise or blame, or that the person's moral status is affected, we have successfully avoided invoking the notion of moral responsibility.

It might in fact be somewhat surprising to you to consider just how much evaluating of behavior and persons can clearly continue, even without any hint of moral responsibility on the part of anyone.

### ***Moral evaluation of behavior***

It really should not be terribly surprising that *nonmoral* evaluations of all sorts (as described above) could continue without bringing in any appeal to moral responsibility. But, what about *moral* evaluation of *behavior*? Can that, too, survive even without moral responsibility? Or, does the abolition of moral responsibility do away with the moral assessment of behavior? Earlier, I said that there is considerable controversy over the answers to questions like these. Although this is not the appropriate place to try to settle all those controversies, it is appropriate to at least understand what the issues are.

Here is a way to think about this set of questions. Try to imagine a situation in which it is possible to say that a bit of behavior was clearly morally wrong (or morally right), but the person who engaged in that behavior was not deserving of any moral evaluation on the basis of the behavior. If there are situations of that sort, then it seems moral evaluation of behavior does *not* imply moral responsibility.

Whether there can be situations of this sort may well depend on our ideas about what a moral evaluation of behavior amounts to. If we adopt the view that moral evaluation of behavior depends solely on the consequences brought about by that behavior—a simple sort of consequentialism—then it seems fairly easy to see that there could be moral evaluation of behavior without moral evaluation of the person who produced that behavior.<sup>8</sup>

Here is an example to illustrate: Imagine a physician who inadvertently makes her patient worse off, despite her best efforts to provide effective treatment. Suppose, in addition, that there was another reasonable course of treatment that would have worked in this case. Assume the physician is not negligent, but is simply ignorant of the relevant truths about what would actually have been a better course of action. Medicine is complex, and the right course of action is often not at all clear; so this is a realistic sort of case. So, the patient is needlessly harmed, and on the simple consequentialist view of morality we are now assuming, the physician did something morally wrong in thusly harming the patient. This has nothing to do with the fact that the physician was trying to do the right thing; the only thing that matters is that the

---

<sup>8</sup>Simple act-utilitarianism is an example of a moral theory that fits this description.

patient was needlessly harmed. On this view, the physician did something morally wrong; however, on this view of morality we are not required to evaluate the physician herself negatively. We can acknowledge the fact that the physician did something wrong, but we don't blame her for it, or think less of her moral standing. Thus, we have here a case of moral evaluation of behavior without moral responsibility on the part of the person who engaged in the behavior.

The conclusion: if we adopt a moral outlook like that illustrated above, we can have moral evaluation of behavior without moral responsibility.

However, I believe the adoption of such a moral outlook would itself be a controversial departure from the usual way that people would look at a case like that of the physician described above. It seems to me that in normal practice we *do* morally evaluate the physician when we evaluate the action of treating the patient. True, we would not *blame* the physician for harming the patient in this case, but we decide not to blame the physician only after we morally evaluate her. In the evaluation of her choice of treatment plan, we will look at the context, in order to see if there was negligence, and to assess the physician's intentions. As a result, we will see the act not simply as the act of harming the patient, but as the act of non-negligently, unsuccessfully trying to help the patient. We will then think the physician was behaving in a morally appropriate way, and evaluate the physician positively, or at least neutrally, from the moral perspective. This essentially introduces the notion of the physician's moral responsibility into the discussion.

This happens because the natural way to evaluate this situation is to invoke moral considerations that go beyond the mere consequences of the physician's treatment plan. The simple form of moral consequentialism that we started with was abandoned as we moved to what I take to be a much more plausible and popular way of thinking about the situation, taking into account what the physician knew and could reasonably have been expected to know, and what the physician's intentions were.

Perhaps there are some rather simple lessons to be learned from this example:

1. At least some forms of moral consequentialism allow for the possibility of moral evaluation of behavior without implying moral responsibility.
2. Whether it is possible to morally evaluate behavior without implying moral responsibility will depend on the kinds of moral considerations used to evaluate the behavior. If one must take intentions that produced the behavior into account when morally evaluating the behavior, that may well make it impossible to evaluate the behavior without evaluating the moral standing of the person who engaged in the behavior.
3. The forms of moral consequentialism that allow us to evaluate behavior without invoking moral responsibility do not reflect current common moral practice.

Although I think these lessons are legitimate, the preceding discussion is brief. There is much more to be said. For example, what about non-consequentialist moral theories that do not emphasize facts about intentions—such as theories that make morality rest

on divine commands, or that rest instead on what it means to live an excellent human life? Since this is not a proper occasion for surveying all the ways that actions might be morally evaluated, the best I can hope for is that you will have been convinced that moral evaluation of behavior without moral responsibility may be possible only if the moral evaluation of behavior does not rest too much on “internal” facts about the persons engaging in the behavior. If the morality of some bit of behavior depends in a crucial way on important features of the person engaging in that behavior, such as the person’s intentions, or the person’s overall excellence as a human being, then it will be very difficult to evaluate the behavior without evaluating the person’s moral standing, thus invoking moral responsibility.

If the preceding analysis is on the right track, it would indeed be possible to abandon the notion of moral responsibility altogether, while retaining the moral evaluation of behavior, but only if the moral evaluation of behavior can be accomplished without moral evaluation of the person engaging in it—that is, without blaming the person or thinking of them as deserving negative consequences for morally bad behavior, and without honoring the person or thinking of them as deserving a reward for morally good behavior. Many folks would probably react to this point by saying that abandoning moral responsibility therefore really does make quite a dent in our ability to conduct moral evaluation of behavior, since many probably do not think an approach to morality that necessarily leaves evaluation of the person out of account can be morally adequate.

#### **Quick summary of the previous discussion**

Some common ways to morally evaluate behavior seem to require moral evaluation of the person engaging in that behavior. These forms of moral evaluation cannot survive if moral responsibility is abandoned.

Other common ways of morally evaluating behavior look only at the behavior itself or the consequences of the behavior, and these evaluation methods seem not to require moral responsibility on the part of anyone. These methods appear safe even if moral responsibility is abandoned.

#### ***Summary so far***

All of these remarks are intended to point to important ways of thinking about other people and ourselves that would not be eliminated if we were to stop using the concept of moral responsibility. Without the concept of moral responsibility, we could still describe people’s characteristics and typical behavior patterns in ways we care about, but we cannot think of those characteristics as reflecting on whether the people are morally good or bad, deserving of moral praise or blame. Even without using a concept of moral responsibility we could still point to ourselves or to others and make a

great many evaluative statements: “She’s a hard worker,” “He’s not very strong,” “He annoys me because he talks too much,” “She makes me feel comfortable,” “He’s not tall enough to do this job,” “She’s very bright,” “He is quite talented,” and so on, and on. Perhaps we could even say things like this: “She usually behaves morally.” But this would have to be a descriptive report about her, not an evaluation of her, and the decision about whether her behavior was moral or not would have to be based in a moral system that did not evaluate her in order to determine that her behavior was moral.

### ***Suppose there were no moral responsibility***

Some many think that life without moral responsibility is acceptable, given the above results. Others may resist, convinced that too much is missing from life without moral responsibility. I have already argued above that certain ways of morally evaluating behavior are not possible without moral responsibility, but we have yet to more fully look at other things that would need to be given up if moral responsibility were abandoned. It is time now to do that.

In the past, I have asked my students whether they believe giving up on moral responsibility would have a negative impact on human dignity. Some have said “yes.” If that answer is right, abandoning moral responsibility would have a heavy cost associated with it. So, I asked these students to explain their reasoning, and here is the argument that evolved from the ensuing discussion:

Giving up on moral responsibility means giving up on morally evaluating oneself (as well as others). It means no longer being able to say things like “I want to be a better person” (since this typically involves moral evaluation of ones own moral standing). It means no longer recognizing oneself as morally guilty or as morally virtuous, no longer feeling ashamed about a low moral standing, or feeling satisfied or happy with a higher moral standing. All this appears to completely undermine the possibility of having moral aspirations, and it undermines as well any notion of honor or integrity.

Now, those are serious claims, not to be taken lightly. There may be something to them, although they may also need to be examined with a bit more caution before we just accept them. You can see what is going on in the above argument—everything hinges on the claim that without invoking the concept of moral responsibility, one cannot morally evaluate one’s own moral standing. That claim is surely correct. The notion that you have a moral standing and that moral standing can be affected by the things you do (or maybe even the thoughts you have), is essentially the core traditional idea of moral responsibility. But if we give up on the idea of evaluating our own moral standing, does it really follow that we lose the possibility of having moral aspirations, as well as a sense of honor or integrity? And does this mean human dignity goes out the window? This requires more thought and clarification.

Probably what it means to have moral aspirations is to want to be a better person—to avoid being morally guilty while at the same time becoming more morally good. Does moral guilt involve moral responsibility? Yes, I believe it does. Being morally guilty is not merely to say that one has in fact committed some moral offense, but also to say that one is responsible for having done so, with the result that one’s moral status has been damaged. One might say that the guilty party is in a guilty state

of being, whether they recognize it or not. Most of us are all too familiar with regretfully thinking that we have committed some moral offense for which we are in fact responsible—treating someone less well than we ought to have treated them, being overly self-centered, being too quick to get angry over small matters, hurting someone needlessly and intentionally, negligently letting down our friends or parents, and so on—and that we thereby have become morally guilty in the relevant sense of guilt.

Being guilty in this way is not the same as *feeling* guilty—some who are guilty seem to have no shame, no guilt feelings at all. However, anyone with a modestly lively conscience has sometimes felt guilty; so, I am sure you know what I am talking about. Now, surely, there are people who are far too guilt-ridden, where exaggerated and unreasonable guilt feelings run amok. However, normal psychologically healthy people reasonably see themselves as having behaved badly on some occasions, and do not feel good about having done so. In such cases, it is possible that the feelings of guilt reflect the reality of actual guilt, assuming that people can indeed be morally responsible.

Again, moral guilt of the sort described above implies moral responsibility. No responsibility, no guilt, because without responsibility, nothing reflects on anyone's moral standing. So, if we were to give up on the concept of moral responsibility, we would be giving up on moral guilt conceived in this way. You could not think of yourself or others as having damaged moral standing. This is clearly a big change from the norm, and does indeed stand in the way of having moral aspirations. This then is a significant consequence of giving up on moral responsibility.

At this point, though, you might be thinking that this doesn't sound like such a bad change. If we gave up on moral responsibility, you would never be guilty. Sounds great! But notice that no one else would ever be guilty either. You could never legitimately think of *anyone* as being morally guilty, no matter how badly they treated you without justification. You could say that someone else had done something you did not like, or that you wish they had not done, or that broke the rules, but you could not morally evaluate them for having done so. If you were raped, you could think that it was a horrible experience, you could be afraid of the rapist, you could be determined not to let it happen again, you could work to prevent the rapist from being able to do anything like that again, you could file a police report and testify at the hearing, but you could not think of the rapist as being morally guilty, or of having done anything that reflects on his or her moral standing. Without moral responsibility, no one has any moral standing. Nothing reflects on anyone, morally speaking.

This means that moral *respect* for yourself or others also disappears. Moral respect is the flip side of moral guilt. Neither one is possible without using the concept of moral responsibility. If no one is morally responsible for anything, nothing reflects on anyone morally, and so moral respect is impossible. After all, moral respect is based on the idea that someone is morally responsible for having done something good, or for having a morally good character. But if no one is thought of as morally responsible, then moral respect goes away.

Have you ever felt good about yourself because you did the right thing? I hope so. But if we were to give up on moral responsibility, such feelings would no longer make sense. If you are not morally responsible for having done the right thing, it makes no sense to feel moral pride or satisfaction for having done it. Why should you get a gold

star if you aren't responsible for having done the good deed? And, of course, this point doesn't apply only to you. It applies to everyone. No moral responsibility, no moral respect, no deserved moral praise for anyone.

Perhaps my students were right. Moral aspiration does seem threatened by any move to give up on moral responsibility. Moral *training* could still be possible—after all, you can train a dog to follow the rules without invoking notions of moral responsibility—but moral aspiration, moral respect, and legitimate sense of guilt all seem incompatible with a system of thought that does not allow moral responsibility. Does this imply loss of a sense of honor? Or loss of human dignity? Those are harder questions that would require more work. But the loss of a sense of moral respect for oneself points to serious trouble along these lines.

Once moral guilt and moral respect go away, so do moral forgiveness and moral praise.

Moral forgiveness (which is the kind of forgiveness most folks think of when they think of forgiveness) makes no sense if there is no perception of moral guilt to be forgiven. Suppose I tell you that I forgive you for having plotted against me, when in fact you are not guilty of anything. (I am completely mistaken about you.) Would you be grateful that I had forgiven you? Of course not. Instead, you would think I am weird, or ignorant, or maybe you would even be offended by my attempt to forgive you for something you had not done. My attempt to forgive you implies that I think you are guilty of something. But we have seen before that without the concept of moral responsibility, no one can be believed to be morally guilty of anything—as soon as I think of you as guilty, I am implying that I think you are morally responsible for something bad. (Not just that you did the bad thing, but that you are responsible for having done so.) So without the concept of moral responsibility, moral forgiveness is nonsensical.

Sincere moral praise of someone—“She’s such a good person,” “He’s really a good guy”—where these expressions are not just describing their behavior as following certain rules, but are evaluations of them as people, obviously disappear once we drop the notion of moral responsibility. If we stop thinking that what people do reflects on their moral standing, what possible grounds could we have for thinking that people ever deserve moral praise? No matter how much we might approve of someone’s behavior, no matter how much we might hope to encourage such behavior in others, no matter how much we might want to say something positive about someone else, we will not be able to use anything the person does as evidence about their moral standing. Someone who risks their life to save someone else cannot be truthfully praised for being a good person for having done so, since they were not morally responsible for having saved anyone. (They were causally responsible, let us suppose, but this does not reflect in any way on their moral standing. If we do allow it to reflect on their moral standing, then we are back to using the concept of moral responsibility.) If we imagine that the concept of moral responsibility has disappeared from society, we could still *utter* words of moral praise, I suppose, but everyone would know that no one really deserved praise, and so the words of praise would be seen as hollow, insincere, sham.

***Would we be better off?***

Here is what I have argued for so far: **Eliminating the concept of moral responsibility would not eliminate nonmoral evaluation of others or of ourselves. But it would eliminate moral praise and respect, moral blame and guilt of individuals (thereby also eliminating the possibility of forgiveness and moral aspiration).**

Would it be a good idea, or would it be a bad idea, to limit the evaluation of others or of yourself in these ways? Many think it would be disaster, since it might be said that to think of evaluating persons in only nonmoral terms destroys human dignity. To refuse to think of humans persons in moral terms, it may be said, fails to recognize that humans, unlike other animals, have a “knowledge of good and evil”—a sense of morality, and the ability to take moral considerations into account when making life choices.<sup>9</sup> Morality is about human intentions and aspirations, it is said, and to ignore this, making it just a matter of rules of conduct or assessment of consequences, is to rip the guts out of it. To abandon moral evaluation of human persons is to dehumanize them, perhaps, from this point of view.

Others, however, think that dropping moral evaluation of ourselves and others would free us from centuries of misguided and ineffective moralizing that accomplishes nothing more than to make some people feel they are better than others while making other people feel like they have little worth. If we could just stop evaluating people’s “moral standing” we could concentrate on more psychologically healthy and effective ways to promote constructive behavior. On this view, the key is to develop positive social attitudes without using moral evaluation of persons, and without employing the concepts about what people morally deserve. Perhaps the notions of justice, desert, and responsibility simply get in the way of social progress, and the time has come to get rid of them.

Although these are surely highly significant and difficult issues, I will leave them to you now to think about on your own. Nothing I have been saying in this section is intended to firmly settle these questions. Rather, I have only been arguing that the concept of moral responsibility is important in our current ways of thinking about ourselves and others, and that to abandon the concept would be to abandon a great deal of our common ways of conceiving life. However, I have also been arguing that it is a mistake to suppose that all of morality and all of evaluation of behavior necessarily must go into the trash heap if moral responsibility were given up.

Because of its importance, the concept of moral responsibility ought not be given up lightly. In what follows, I will discuss various problems with the concept and some suggested solutions to those problems. The aim will be to see if an adequate theory of moral responsibility can be constructed, thus validating the continued use of the concept.

---

<sup>9</sup> The allusion here regarding “knowledge of good and evil” is to the Hebrew Bible. See *Genesis*, Ch. 3.

### **Suggested study activities**

1. Make a list of perhaps a dozen positive and negative evaluative terms you might use in talking about someone else or about yourself. (E.g., “talented,” “cowardly.”) For each, indicate whether giving up on the concept of moral responsibility would mean giving up the use of that term. (Sometimes it might not be so clear! In those cases, provide a bit of discussion.)
2. Suppose we were to stop thinking of people as being morally responsible. What would be the likely result for our criminal justice system? Would we have to stop punishing people for anti-social behavior? Or would we change the way we think about punishment?
3. Do you agree with those who think that giving up on moral responsibility would mean giving up on the idea of human dignity? Why?