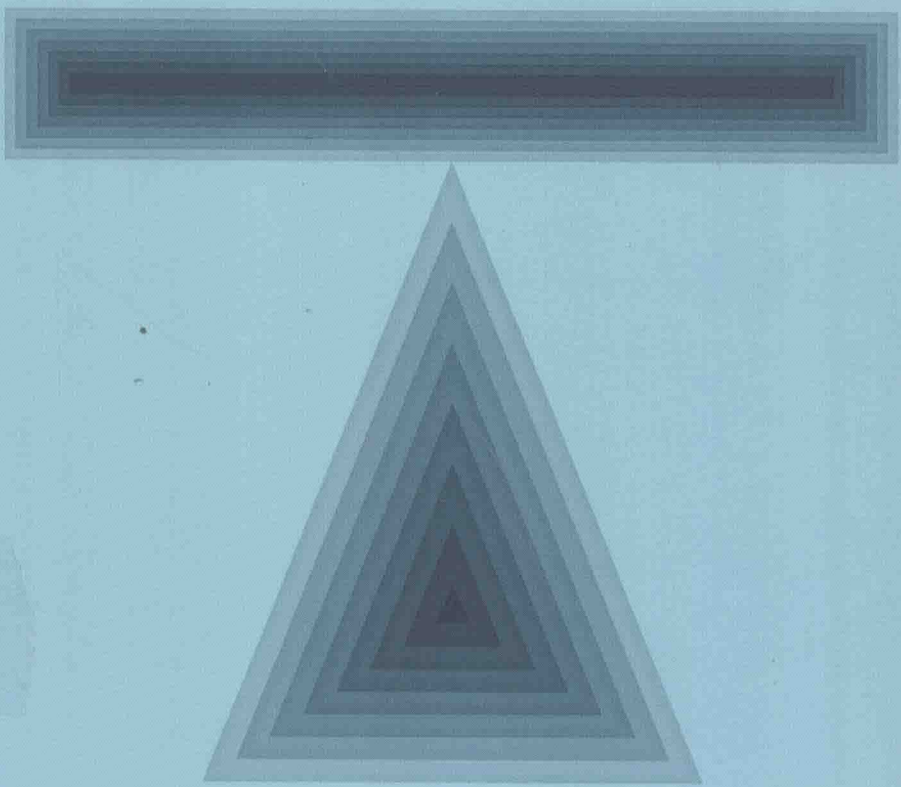
Moral Responsibility

Matthew Talbert



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For Elizabeth

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Introduction

This book introduces the concept of moral responsibility (as it is used in contemporary philosophy) and explores the justifiability of the moral practices associated with holding people responsible for their behavior. Among the most important and familiar of these practices are *moral praise* and *moral blame*. Praise and blame depend on moral responsibility in the sense that people are open to these responses only if they are morally responsible for the behaviors for which they are praised or blamed. Typically, a person is open to blame only if she is morally responsible for behavior that is wrong (or bad) and she is open to praise only if she is morally responsible for behavior that is right (or good).

Interestingly, while a person isn't blameworthy or praiseworthy unless she is morally responsible, it does seem possible to be morally responsible for behavior that is neither right nor wrong and is thus neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. This last claim may seem strange: How can someone be morally responsible for twiddling her thumbs or for ordering Pepsi instead of Coke if there's nothing morally interesting about these behaviors?

Despite the initial peculiarity, we should allow for the possibility just described because what really seems to matter for moral responsibility is not that a person's action is either right or wrong *but rather that the person is related to the action in a certain way*. We might think, for example, that a person's

action needs to belong to her in a particular way, or that she needs to have exercised a certain sort of control over the action, in order to be morally responsible for it. Philosophers debate the precise nature and form of the relational requirements that apply to moral responsibility, but in general it doesn't seem that fulfillment of these requirements depends on an agent's behavior being either right or wrong. We should allow, then, that, regardless of whether an agent's behavior is good, bad, or indifferent, she can be morally responsible for that behavior as long as she bears the right relation to it.

Of course, we won't be much concerned in this book with moral responsibility for indifferent behavior. Indeed, we won't even be that much concerned with moral responsibility for praiseworthy behavior. In this book, as in most philosophical treatments of moral responsibility, our focus will tend to fall on moral responsibility for bad behavior: that is, on blameworthiness. Why do philosophers focus on moral blame? Part of the reason is that most philosophers assume that praise and blame are symmetrical and that the kind of relation that one must bear to a bad action in order to be blameworthy for it is the same kind of relation that one must bear to a good action in order to be praiseworthy for it. This assumption has been questioned (Wolf 1980, 1990; Nelkin 2011), but, if it is right, we learn something about praiseworthiness when we uncover the conditions that apply to blameworthiness. Of course, by this logic, philosophers might as well focus on praiseworthiness as on blameworthiness, and yet that's not what happens.

The deeper reason for philosophers' disproportionate interest in blame is that there is often more at stake in cases of blame than in cases of praise. To be blamed for something – to be subjected to another person's scorn and recrimination, to be avoided, ostracized, or punished – can be extremely unpleasant and even dangerous. It follows that we ought to make sure that we blame people only when they deserve it, and this means that we need to have a reasonably well-developed understanding of what makes a person blameworthy and what excuses a person from blame. On the other hand, while it may in some sense be unfair or unjust to praise a person who does not deserve praise, it is typically not unpleasant or harmful to be the target of undeserved praise.

Since we seem to have less interest in avoiding inappropriate praise than we do inappropriate blame, it's perhaps natural that philosophers have spent more time thinking about what it takes for a person to be a fair target of moral blame.

Before getting into debates about what it takes for a person to be morally responsible for her behavior, it will be helpful to consider the many different – and potentially confusing – ways that English speakers employ talk of "responsibility." I address this issue in roughly the first third of chapter 1. The rest of that chapter introduces readers to debates about the compatibility of free will and determinism. The literature on moral responsibility can't be cleanly disconnected from the literature on free will. However, since this book attempts to focus on the former topic, I try at the end of chapter 1 to distinguish the questions about moral responsibility with which I will be concerned from questions about free will. In chapter 2, I outline some general approaches to moral responsibility and introduce concepts and distinctions that will be useful for understanding the debates described in subsequent chapters; I also identify the approach to moral responsibility that I personally favor and to which I will often return in this book. In chapter 3, I turn to the question of whether a person's social context or bad luck can undermine her moral responsibility. It's here that we encounter arguments for skepticism about moral responsibility for the first time. In chapter 4, the focus is on the way that psychological impairments might (or might not) undermine moral responsibility. Finally, chapter 5 considers recent debates about how a person's awareness of the consequences and moral status of her actions can affect her moral responsibility. In this final chapter, we encounter additional grounds for skepticism about moral responsibility.

When readers finish this book, they should have a good sense of how contemporary philosophers approach the subject of moral responsibility and, indeed, will be in a position to begin to form their own conclusions about what's required – in terms of ownership and control of actions, psychological capacities, and moral knowledge – for a person to be held morally responsible for her behavior. I also hope that readers begin to see how the various debates about moral responsibility fit together. To this end, I close each chapter with conclud-

ing remarks meant to highlight its themes and to relate these themes to earlier discussions. Finally, in order to guide future reading and research, I include at the end of each chapter brief suggestions for additional reading.

1

Responsibility, Moral Responsibility, and Free Will

When philosophers talk about "moral responsibility" they usually have in mind a relationship that can hold between people and the actions they perform, or between people and the consequences of their actions. We typically say that a person is "morally responsible *for*" an action or a consequence: we say, for example, "Clyde is morally responsible for robbing the bank" or "Clyde is morally responsible for the fact that the bank was robbed." A person can also be morally responsible for *not* performing a certain action or for the consequences of failing to act in a certain way. Suppose that Clyde could have easily saved the life of a child drowning in a shallow pool but that he chose not to because he just didn't care about saving the child's life. In this case, if the child drowns, it would be natural to say that Clyde is morally responsible (and presumably blameworthy) for the child's death.

Though we'll encounter more detailed approaches in the next chapter, a good place to start is to think of an assertion such as "Clyde is morally responsible for robbing the bank" as attributing behavior to Clyde in a way that makes certain responses toward him appropriate. Since robbing banks is usually a morally bad thing to do, if Clyde is morally responsible for robbing a bank, then it is probably appropriate to make a negative moral assessment of Clyde and to blame him on account of his behavior. On the other hand, if Clyde were

morally responsible for foiling a robbery or for saving a drowning child, then it would probably be appropriate to make a positive moral assessment of him and to praise him for his behavior. I say "probably," because sometimes people perform actions that would ordinarily be praiseworthy, but they do so for reasons that don't reflect well on them. Suppose, for example, that, as Bonnie was making her escape from a bank robbery, she paused to pull a drowning child from a fountain, but only because she wanted to use the child as a human shield. It would be odd to praise Bonnie for what she did even if we are glad that she did not let the child drown. In a similar way, we might revise our judgment about Clyde's blameworthiness if we learned that, when he robs banks, he takes money only from the accounts of far worse criminals and gives it all to worthy charities. Clyde would still be morally responsible for his behavior in the sense that it would still be *his* behavior, but, if his actions now seem less morally bad than they otherwise would, his actions also provide less basis for moral blame.

1.1 Varieties of Responsibility

An initial problem for attempts to characterize moral responsibility is that the words "responsible" and "responsibility" are used in several different ways in English. These usages are unified to the degree that they involve either the idea that a person is liable to give an account – a *response* – for some state of affairs or the related idea that a person is subject to certain obligations and is therefore answerable to a standard defined by those obligations: in other words, the responsible person is liable to a response from others.

H. L. A. Hart, the great twentieth-century philosopher of law, illustrates the diversity of our talk about responsibility with the following vignette about a drunken sea captain and the fate of his ship:

> As captain of the ship, X was responsible for the safety of his passengers and crew. But on the last voyage he got drunk every night and was responsible for the loss of the ship with all aboard. It was rumored that he was insane, but the doctors

> considered that he was responsible for his actions. Throughout the voyage he behaved quite irresponsibly, and various incidents in his career showed that he was not a responsible person. He always maintained that the exceptional winter storms were responsible for the loss of the ship, but in the legal proceedings brought against him he was found criminally responsible for his negligent conduct, and in separate civil proceedings he was held legally responsible for the loss of life and property. He is still alive and he is morally responsible for the deaths of many women and children. (1968: 211)

Role Responsibility

Let's give Hart's captain the name "Jack." Since Jack is captain of his ship, he has an important duty with respect to its passengers and crew – he is supposed to ensure their safety. We can express this thought by saying that a captain is "responsible for" the safety of his or her passengers and crew; we could also say that their safety is a captain's "responsibility." Here the word "responsibility" picks out a specific duty or obligation that captains have. A captain has this duty – this responsibility – simply because he or she occupies the role of captain. Similarly, in virtue of being a parent, a person acquires certain duties: a child is its parent's responsibility and the parent is responsible for the child's health, welfare, upbringing, and so on.

A good captain performs the duties associated with being a captain well and a good parent performs the duties associated with being a parent well. It is common to hear such people described as a "responsible captain" or a "responsible parent." Of course, the same person might be both a responsible captain and an irresponsible parent. Here the word "responsible" commends a person's behavior relative to the standards that apply to the role that the person occupies. We also use this sense of "responsible" in a more general way: Captain Jack is not just an irresponsible captain; it's also said that he "was not a responsible person." In other words, he's generally not the sort of person that you can rely on to fulfill his obligations.

Just as role-dependent duties are sometimes called "responsibilities," we occasionally see the phrase "moral responsibility"

used to refer to moral duties more generally. For example, in light of reports that retired National Football League players have an increased risk of dementia, a sportswriter recently wondered whether it is "morally responsible to enjoy this sport" (Ryan 2013). The suggestion is that, because of the injuries done to players, perhaps contributing to the NFL's profitability is a morally bad thing to do. Similarly, US Congressman Tom McClintock was recently asked in an interview for his opinion about President Barack Obama's stance on the use of military force against Syria (Goodwyn 2013). McClintock said, "The president has been very reluctant to get involved in Syria, but he says that with the use of chemical weapons, of gas, that there's a moral responsibility here. What about that issue of moral responsibility?" Again, the idea is that a "moral responsibility" is a moral obligation. Generally, this is *not* how philosophers talk about moral responsibility: the focus is not on *having* moral responsibilities (in the sense of having obligations) but, rather, on whether we *are* morally responsible for the fact that we did, or did not, live up to our obligations.

Causal Responsibility

We also talk about responsibility in the context of assigning *causal* responsibility for various events and outcomes: we say that someone or something is responsible for an event because he, she, or it caused it to occur. While Captain Jack "maintained that the exceptional winter storms were responsible for the loss of the ship," Hart's story tells us that Jack himself is "responsible for the loss of the ship with all aboard." Hart tells us, in other words, that Jack caused the wreck even though Jack would like us to believe that it was the winter storms that did it.

Causation is a complicated topic. This is illustrated by the fact that Jack's behavior and the weather might both have had genuine roles to play in explaining why the ship sank. Let's suppose that, even if there were unprecedented winter storms, the ship would not have sunk had Jack been sober and able to attend to his duties. When we have this fact in mind, it might be natural to say that Jack's behavior caused

the wreck. But let us also suppose that, even given Jack's drunkenness, the ship would not have sunk if it had not encountered such bad storms – in other words, the captain's drunkenness was not by itself enough to cause the wreck. It might seem now that the storm is partly *to blame* for the wreck after all. (Of course I am using "blame" here in a purely causal, non-moral sense – even if the weather did cause the ship to sink, it's not a candidate for moral blame.) And what if the ship had been better built so as to withstand harsh weather? What if the ship had never left port or had sailed a different route? What if the first officer had relieved Jack of command? Tragedy might have been prevented in each of these cases. So what really caused the ship to sink?

Fortunately, it's not our job to decide on a single factor that caused Jack's ship to sink. All the factors mentioned above might consistently be cited in an account of the ship's fate. The factors that seem most relevant to us will depend in part on the perspective from which we approach the subject. An engineer interested in preventing future wrecks might focus on aspects of the ship's construction, while a meteorologist might be more interested in the unusual weather. Of course, the captain's role in the ship's fate is particularly interesting since he was specifically charged with the ship's safety – it was his responsibility – and Jack's repeated episodes of drunkenness were hardly compatible with attending to his duty.

We can say this much at least: in normal cases, we typically hold people morally responsible for actions and outcomes only if they played a direct or indirect causal role in bringing these things about. (Cases of omission present a difficulty here: Clyde may be morally responsible for a child's death if he lets the child drown, but, if Clyde didn't *do* anything, did he *cause* the child's death?) However, causal responsibility is not *enough* for moral responsibility because a person can cause an outcome without being morally responsible for it. Suppose that you foolishly let your two-year-old sister play with your fancy (and delicate) new phone and that she drops it on the floor, cracking its glass screen. Your sister may bear at least partial causal responsibility for the damage done to your phone, but you should not hold her morally responsible for this outcome. This means that, while you might be upset

or even angry that your phone was damaged, it would not be appropriate for you to respond to your sister with the sort of moral condemnation and moral anger that characterizes blame.

One might be tempted to say, "It's not her fault," on your sister's behalf. However, in one way, this claim is false. After all, your sister is the one who dropped the phone, so it's natural to say that *she* broke it. But talk of being "at fault" does not aim solely at picking out causes. Your sister broke your phone, but doing so was not her fault in the sense that she can't be (morally) *faulted* for what she did. In other words, the fact that she broke your phone does not suggest or stem from a moral fault in her. And that's why you don't, or at least shouldn't, blame you sister for breaking the phone. Things would be very different if your seventeen-year-old brother broke your new phone on purpose because he was angry that he had to make do with an older model. With your brother, moral condemnation and moral anger might be entirely appropriate. The reason for this is that your brother's behavior has a kind of moral significance for you that your sister's behavior cannot have, and this is because, among other things, your brother knew what he was doing and he acted on purpose when he broke your phone.

Causal and moral responsibility can come apart in other ways as well. Suppose that Captain Jack did not voluntarily become drunk but that his first officer spiked his morning coffee with LSD, and it was because of this that Jack made poor decisions that led his ship to disaster. In this case, Jack's actions played an important role in bringing about the disaster, and he certainly failed to behave as a responsible, sober captain, but we probably shouldn't regard him as morally responsible for making his bad decisions and for the disaster that befell the ship. It would be unfair to blame Jack on account of his decisions because these decisions and their consequences would not be under his control in the right way – so they would not belong to him in the right way – for him to be held morally responsible for them.

To take another example, suppose that Captain Jack was perfectly sober and that he sailed his ship into a dangerous storm on purpose. In this case, he will bear significant causal responsibility for the consequences of his decision, and, since