

*F. Hilton Page*

## Varieties of Responsibility

I was pondering the question why it should fall to me to open this series of discussions when I discovered from my diary that today is St. Luke's Day—the festival of the patron saint of physicians. According to one idea of philosophy, its function is to provide intellectual therapy, the medicine of the mind; the philosopher is the physician of the intellect. Philosophy, it is alleged, lays bare hidden assumptions, distinguishes logical categories, detects faulty analogies and unsuspected fallacies, and at the very least enables us to see what our conceptual puzzles and problems really amount to, which is frequently nothing at all, after all. This might be more likely to be so if only philosophers were not themselves human, men of like passions and frailties with the rest of mankind. Hence they are not immune to the cry, "Physician, heal thyself!" Anyhow, there may be some faint semblance of appropriateness in having a philosopher lead off on St. Luke's Day. But I am afraid that, even under his tutelary guidance, much remains in my mind obscure and elusive about the subject "responsibility." So I have tried to limit the field to moral responsibility and to an aspect of moral responsibility that I hope will be manageable by me at the present stage of my reflections.

### I

When philosophers discuss responsibility their talk is usually about such themes as determinism and moral freedom; about the notions of agency and accountability; about limited, diminished or impaired responsibility; about intentional and unintentional acts; about excuses, and evasions of responsibility; and about punishment. Certainly these are questions well worth pursuing, but the literature is vast, the ground well-trodden, the arguments shopworn with much handling, and the *taedium academicum*, I suspect, inevitable.

There is, however, one aspect of responsibility that I have not seen discussed in the literature which interests me and which I hope is worth our discussing.

Jonathan Glover on the first page of his book *Responsibility* (1970) (the best quite recent study by a philosopher, I think) remarks: "The concept of 'responsibility' is an elusive one" and on the second page: "Debates on responsibility and its limits take place in isolated compartments." I have a suspicion that the elusiveness springs from supposing that there must be some ideal concept—"the concept"—of responsibility, and that this will then fit, or can be made to fit, all "the isolated compartments" (politics, law, education, science, religion, ecology and so on) in which discussions of "responsibility" take place.

There seem to be two assumptions that are commonly made: the first, that all responsibility is the same in the sense that all responsible people have the same notion of what they are doing when they are being responsible; and the second, that responsibility is always good, praiseworthy, commendable and morally excellent. It is said<sup>1</sup> that Wittgenstein thought of using as a motto for his *Philosophical investigations* the words spoken by the Earl of Kent in *King Lear*: "I will teach you differences." Far be it from me to presume to think of teaching this august and learned gathering, but with that proviso the words would suit admirably as an epigraph for my paper, and as Wittgenstein didn't use them perhaps I may. For my paper is about differences and its aim is to show that not all responsibility is the same, but that there are varieties of responsibility, some good, some bad.

When I speak of varieties of responsibility I am not here referring to the areas or regions of responsibility, such as moral, legal, political, social, ecological, religious; responsibilities to God, to our fellows, to the environment and so on. Nor am I thinking of differences in what the particular responsibilities are believed to be in concrete detail, e.g. in worshipping the Deity does one kneel, or prostrate oneself, or just sit down? does one turn to the East, or does that matter? in serving one's less fortunate fellows does one give them money to buy food, or assist them to grow their own? in respecting and protecting the environment does one just leave it alone as a wilderness or intervene more actively in maintaining balanced growth? There are certainly varieties in these respects, but the varieties I have in mind are varieties in the ways in which "responsible" people interpret what sort of going-on, behaviour, activity is involved in their being responsible or having responsibility; the kind of "thing" which responsibility—to whomsoever, for whatsoever—appears to be to the responsible person him-

self. I am not suggesting that such beliefs, feelings, attitudes, are necessarily, or even frequently, conceptualized or linguistically formulated. The responsible person has a motivation to act "responsibly" and what interests me here is the motivation at work. How does he see the nature or meaning of his action as *responsible* action? What does it do for him in his own internal economy, so to speak? What is "the profit of it" in personal terms? I don't mean to suggest that the person deliberately or self-consciously asks himself these questions before engaging in the responsible action, or that he formulates for himself criteria or principles of a self-regarding kind, or of any kind. That is why I hesitate to speak of varieties of "concepts" of responsibility. Rather I should prefer to speak of ways, forms, kinds, modes, types, or of images or pictures, or to be more modish of models or of paradigms. I shall speak of models, though with some hesitation. The model is really something the investigator constructs, it is an inference, or a hypothetical construct, derived from his study of the responsible person's deeds and words. The responsible person is not necessarily aware of the model. Typically he is aware only of the satisfaction that comes to him from his functioning in certain ("responsible") ways in certain situations, situations which arouse in him the tendency to "responsible" action. Not all responsibility, then, I am suggesting, is the same in terms of its motivation, of what goes on internally, inside the "responsible" person, in its personal meaning. What I have in mind will become clearer, I hope, as I characterize the various models I am about to distinguish.

One further preliminary: inevitably our enquiry will carry us into the sphere of the pathological; not in the more familiar sense of a consideration of impairments of responsibility (through drugs, alcohol, hormonal changes at the climacteric, mental derangement or retardation, senile decay, prefrontal lobotomy, etc.) but of models that seem manifestly defective, or perverse, or bizarre, or somehow self-defeating. I want to make it clear that it is not my intention to present a morbidly negative picture of responsibility, exhibiting only the warpings and twistings which show its liability to misadventure. If we are to consider the variety of models we must include both the achievements and the mishaps of responsibility. Perhaps the word has too generally been allowed to wear a halo which it has not always deserved. To be aware of this may moderate any overzealous attempt to universalize the goodness of each and every practice of responsibility. It may help us to be more keenly aware that not all responsibility has the same "logic," that naming it by the same name does not entail that there is

the same kind of internal "machinery" for all its practitioners. It may help us to formulate criteria by which to discriminate more realistically between the various models all of which find shelter under this hospitable umbrella, yet differ profoundly, for good or ill, in their effects on the responsibility-practising people and on those for whom they take responsibility.

## II

1. A familiar model to begin with is what I call *the legalistic model*. I must hasten to add that it has nothing directly to do with exclusively legal responsibility. Actually I am not very happy about several of my labels and any suggestions towards devising more appropriate ones will certainly be very welcome. Maybe the "work-to-rule model?" or the "machine-model?" Here responsibility means close obedience in detail to prescribed rules or commands. The more exactly the rules are followed the more responsible the behaviour is. The letter rather than the spirit is to be obeyed. Circumstances, conditions, even outcomes are irrelevant. To go beyond one's specified responsibilities is to trespass on the responsibilities of others. One thinks of job descriptions, of chains of command, where one is locked into regulations, with no scope for individual initiative. On the other hand one enjoys a release from decision-making, and one may even feel the security of believing oneself to be always in the right because some controlling agent has determined for one what is to be right and what is to be wrong. One's burden of responsibility is light compared with that of the one who is encouraged or required to exercise his reflective powers and his freedom of choice. What one loses in autonomy one gains in "the security of presumed moral certitude, and in avoiding the risk of making mistakes."<sup>2</sup> But when situations change and conditions are altered and the old rules are no longer adequate or appropriate or practicable, then one hardly knows what one's responsibility is. One is tied to dated specificities.

Sometimes following the "legalistic" model simply offers a release from "the burden of the soul," the burden of decision-making. At others one suspects that such narrowly defined and unadaptable responsibility may be the expression of resentment, of hatred and anger. Sometimes, when one senses an unsympathetic atmosphere, and is given the runaround in a large office or department store, one suspects that the employees, working in an atmosphere of tension and hostility, are finding a temporary release in a display of *Schadenfreude* at one's expense. One remembers the plea of Adolf Eichmann at his

trial that, in giving orders for the execution of Jews in the Holocaust, he was acting in a totally responsible manner because he was dutifully carrying out the orders of his superiors. The "legalistic" model makes possible the gratification of sadistic desires because it permits the inflicting of pain on others while at the same time justifying the action because it is within the limits of one's responsibility. It is a stranger to mercy and compassion. It knows nothing of turning the other cheek or forgiving till seventy times seven. It has the responsibility of the machine, of the computer, of the "scribe" and the "Pharisee." It seems not fully human. Yet it is this in the name of "responsibility." It is incapable of responding to anything beyond clearly specified details of conduct. For the "legalistic" model responsibility is detailed obedience to prescribe rules or commands, sharply defined by specific directives, and that is all.

2. An exaggeration of legalistic responsibility along one direction gives us model number two: *the scrupulosity model*. Here there is legalism and literalism but in addition an obsessive attention to getting the details just right and a compulsive need constantly to reassure oneself that one has got them just right. There is an ill-proportioned anxiety out of all relation to reality. Here the model of responsibility is to be absolutely certain that one has done everything correctly in minutest and most precise detail. The diverting of attention to minutiae, the compulsive need to be constantly reassured, lead to a great deal of self-directed anxiety, a painful carefulness, coupled with a strange neglect of larger issues. One may worry oneself sick at discovering that one has unwittingly accepted ten cents more change than one was entitled to at the supermarket, or at having steamed off an uncanceled stamp from an envelope to use again when one finds that one has exhausted one's purchased supply and the Post Office is now closed, and yet ignore completely one's complicity in a shady deal, or one's deeply wounding act to a friend. Psychogenic pain may result from even a minor lapse which may serve to ward off the still more unpleasant feeling of (largely irrational) guilt. Yet so great is the self-involvement that this may be coupled with a strange callousness to the sufferings of others and an absence of the more positive, outgoing, other-directed aspects of responsible behaviour. It shares the impersonalism of the "legalistic" model. If the latter can permit sadism, the scrupulosity model can hardly escape masochism. Its impossible goal inevitably creates "guilt" (irrational guilt) which is penitentially

relieved by pain-seeking and self-punishment. A vicious circle is set up. This model does seem sadly twisted and self-defeating.

3. Model number three is in *one* respect quite the converse of No. 2 (the scrupulosity model). Here responsibility is directed towards others but with a vengeance, one might say. I call it *the patronage model*. What started me thinking about this was something I read years ago, and no doubt imperfectly recall, which suddenly came into my mind out of nowhere: Jefferys (editor of the *Edinburgh Review*) writing to Thomas Carlyle: "You have no duty on earth, believe me, so great as to be innocently happy," a crushing rebuke to one who has been flattering himself because of his many "responsibilities" and making much of them. Here the model is that responsibility *is* responsibility for others, but for others all and sundry, in season and out of season, excessive, not always appropriate, self-centred and self-approving. The motivation seems to be the reassuring assertion of one's sense of superiority to others whom one helps or serves or has dependent on one. In doing so one sees oneself as generously (but really predaciously?) appropriating to oneself the responsibilities of others, engorging them (as it were) and encapsulating them within one's own responsibility. The mother who smothers the initiative of her child by taking all his responsibility upon herself; the Lady Bountiful who makes herself responsible for the welfare, in great and intimate detail, of everyone in the neighbourhood or within the circle of her acquaintance; the teacher who does it all for her class so that they never learn to take their own responsibility for their own learning, are familiar examples. One of Theophrastus's *Characters*, "The Officious Man," gives us a specimen from antiquity. Actually in the Loeb Classical Library edition (translated by J. E. Edmonds) it begins: "Officiousness will seem to be a well-meaning over-assumption of *responsibility* in word and deed." (My italics.) Since later on I am going to say that the Greeks didn't have a word for it (i.e. for responsibility), I must hasten to point out that the Greek simply speaks of *προσποιησι τι λογων και πραξεων μετ ευνοια* "a well-meaning presumption in word and deed." In the earlier translations I have seen (Healey, Jebb, Howell) there is no mention of "responsibility." This reinforces what I will say later on about "responsibility" being a newcomer to moral discourse but already a naturalized citizen very much at its ease in Zion. To today's translator it comes very naturally to hand in rendering a passage which contains no simple equivalent.

In moral theology a distinction is made between the service of humility and the service of patronage. The latter is *patronizing*. It is the assuming of responsibility for others which they have never asked for, may not want, and almost always resent. There are those we instinctively do not want to be helped by because we sense that we are to them not fellow human beings but material for the inflating of their own egos, their own pride in their own virtue, out of their superiority. We resent their help because we feel humiliated by it. We recall Nietzsche's jibe: "Love your enemies, nothing will annoy them more." We sense insincerity, hypocrisy, at best self-deception, in an assertion of superiority masquerading as responsibility. The model here is that to be responsible is to appropriate to oneself as many of the responsibilities of as many others as possible, and the motivation, perhaps unconscious, under the guise of "service to humanity," to assert one's own superiority.

4. There are no doubt many other anomalous types. I will mention one more: *the model of indifference*. It takes two forms: (a) the pocourante, and (b) the psychopath.

(a) We might say of the pocourante that he is *passively* indifferent to responsibility. The model here is that responsibility is a bore and a nuisance, and involvement with it is to be avoided. It was no less a person than Thomas Henry Huxley, the Victorian agnostic (he invented the word "agnostic") who wrote, perhaps in a whimsical and uncharacteristic moment: "I protest that if some great Power would agree to always make me think what is true and do what is right, on condition of being turned into a sort of clock and wound up every morning before I got out of bed, I should instantly close with the offer."<sup>3</sup>

(b) The other is the psychopath (or psychopathic personality or antisocial personality) whose indifference is not passive like that of the pocourante, but active, if that is not a contradiction in terms. Hervey Cleckley, who has given the classic picture<sup>4</sup> of this curious type, cites this example: "A young man abandons his ill mother in a stranded car at night. Questioned later he is entirely unembarrassed: on his way walking to the gas station he had met an acquaintance and got into conversation; as for his mother, 'Everybody has to die sometime.' " The psychopath, according to Cleckley, "lacks the capacity of persistent ordered living of any kind," shows no consideration for past and future and "a callous disregard for the happiness of others." Whether



he can properly be held to be responsible for his actions at all is a question that has been much discussed.

The pococurante and the psychopath constitute two forms, the one passive, the other active, of the model of indifference to responsibility.

But there are other models which are calculated to draw from us a more positive response, more of the sort we might hope to find if we were to follow Hume's admonition, to "turn your reflection into your own breast."<sup>5</sup>

5. I call model number five *heroic responsibility*. Here to behave responsibly is to go to the limit in self-denial, self-abnegation, making no claim for oneself. I think of Simone Weil, the French Resistance worker and philosopher, in her last days in London, feeling a responsibility to eat as little as possible in order to send food to France, and dying really of starvation; of Ian Ramsey, the one-time Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford, who visited us here just after the New Year in 1963, who later became Bishop of Durham and would almost certainly have succeeded his namesake Michael Ramsey as Archbishop of Canterbury had he not died prematurely in 1972, a man of great gifts and incredible industry both as scholar and as administrator who interpreted responsibility to mean never to say no to an invitation to write, to preside, to speak, to chair a committee, not to heed the warning of his first severe heart attack, to go on forcing himself to undertake everything that came to hand, to die of a second attack at the height of his intellectual powers at 57; or of those Vietnamese Buddhist monks burning themselves to death to call attention to the suffering endured by the Vietnamese. "The press spoke of suicide" (I am quoting from the book *The Lotus in the Sea of Fire* [1967]),

but in essence it is not. It is not even a protest. What the monks said in the letters they left before burning themselves aimed only at alarming, at moving the hearts of the oppressors and at calling the attention of the world to the suffering endured then by the Vietnamese. To burn oneself by fire is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. . . . During the ceremony of ordination, as practised in the Mahayana tradition, the monk candidate is required to burn one, or more, small spots on his body in taking the vow . . . when the words are uttered when kneeling before the community of Sangha and experiencing this kind of pain, they will express all the seriousness of one's heart and mind, and carry much greater weight. . . . The Vietnamese monk by burning himself, says with all his strength and determination that he can endure the greatest of sufferings to protect his people.<sup>6</sup>



Here the model is that to act responsibly is to go to the very limit with complete self-abnegation.

6. Number six I call *the Promethean or Extentionalist model*. It contrasts most sharply with numbers one and two, the legalistic and scrupulosity models. Nietzsche said in *The Anti-Christ*: "A virtue must be our own invention." Hence his attack on conventional Christianity as a "giving way to base conformity, as a resentment of the weak against the strong, a retreat from the excellent." Freedom, openness, decision, commitment are the watch-words. "Men create their own values." "Man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for himself and for the world as a way of being" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* [1958], 554). There is no rational way of justifying the acceptance of moral principles with one content rather than another. "If God is dead then everything is permitted." Man creates his values by his deliberate choices. The existentialist model is that responsibility is responsibility to one's own integrity as one decides oneself how one shall choose to act without reference or submission to any rules or authorities which would seek to make one's decisions for one. The responsibility is in the wholeheartedness and intensity of the commitment, not in what one is committed to, for that is inevitably arbitrary.

7. The last I shall mention I call *the autonomy model*. Here responsibility is somewhat ideally regarded as action in the light of moral values and ethical principles which have been reached by personal reflection and individual appropriation, quite independently of their compatibility or incompatibility with the conventional wisdom of the society. The emphasis in this model is on what is called moral "creativity" which is contrasted with mere compliance, or at least with conformity for conformity's sake.

On this model responsibility includes trustworthiness, dependability, loyalty and fidelity to commitments and involvements already existing but it also demands openness to new possibilities, the acceptance of the freedom to intervene in the course of events, to shift the priorities of responsibilities in the light of special circumstances and conditions, the willingness and the courage to take risks rather than statically and unenterprisingly to play it safe. The interest here is more on the positive promotion of the good than in the avoiding of evil. The positive attraction of the good outweighs the fearful avoidance and dread of guilt as the motivation of action. While it does not have quite the "Promethean" quality of the existential model, nor portray in such

lurid terms the absurdity of the human situation, the autonomy model does require that a course of responsible action be a free choice and not, in Charles Davis's words, a conditioned reflex. This is in line with Bonhoeffer's summary in his posthumous *Ethics*: "The structure of responsibility is conditioned by two factors: life is bound to man and to God, and a man's own life is free . . . without the bond and without the freedom there is no responsibility."<sup>7</sup> It might be considered a compromise view (between obedience and initiative, between bondage and freedom), but it might also be seen as a more balanced model. The emphasis on personal reflection and individual appropriation suggests a somewhat elitist outlook.

### III

In this paper I have sketched in rather broad strokes a number of different models of responsibility, each delineating what moral responsibility represents to the "responsible" person. My aim has been to indicate the rich variety of attitudes, feelings, and interpretations which finds shelter beneath this umbrella-word and which makes "responsibility" so elusive to more formal conceptualization.

I confess that there are two things that still puzzle me, two questions to which I have been unable to find answers.

First, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest example of the word, in its moral sense, is dated 1836: "the great God has treated us as responsible beings." How did it come about that "responsibility" (in its moral sense) began to come into circulation at that particular time? And why did it then go on so quickly to infiltrate and almost to overrun the language of moral discourse? It doesn't occur in the Authorized Version of the Holy Scriptures, the Greeks didn't have a word for it, nor did the Romans, nor did our ancestors employ it until almost the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign, about 140 years ago. One possibility, but it is little more than sheer speculation, is that it was about this time that the deontological ethics of Immanuel Kant (duty, obligation, the categorical imperative, only the motive counts, imputability, freedom, the worth of personality and of persons as ends) began to be more widely appreciated in the English-speaking world and to offer an alternative, perhaps a welcome alternative, to Benthamite Utilitarianism. There had always been a strong Stoic element in Christian ethics and Kant brought Stoic ideas again to the fore.

Of course much has been lost since on the way: the idea of responsibility as a response, elicited by the action of an objective external reality; the responsible man as a responder, as one who answers; the relational aspect, the "answering," the element of performing an action in return to an action on us, *corresponding* to the action; the hint of a pledge or promise (*sponsum*) in the *response*; these are aspects which have tended to become less prominent.

Anyhow, the recency of its adoption, the rapidity of its rise strike me as curiosities in the history of ideas which have yet to be fully explained.

My other puzzle is: what is there about the word that has this peculiar "magic" for our own contemporaries, this power that has enabled it to retain its prominence in moral philosophy, in moral theology, and even in everyday conversation? Is it just because it is more a composite of feelings, attitudes and interpretations than a sharply defined concept? Is elusiveness a condition of "magic?" Or, is it because it has had the capability of penetrating into every area and of becoming a connecting thread between the moral, legal, political, social, industrial, ecological and religious aspects of modern life?

Richard Niebuhr, in a sensitive and moving work published just after his death, wrote:

It [the word 'responsibility'] is a relatively late-born child . . . in the family of words in which duty, laws, virtue, goodness and morality are its much older siblings. This history may mean nothing more, of course, than that men have found a new sign for a well-known phenomenon and an old idea: many writers, indeed, so use it, as their definitions plainly show. But it is also possible that the word gives us a new symbol with which to grasp and understand not a really well-known phenomenon or an old idea but the actuality of that human existence of which other aspects came into view when we employed the older symbols of *the mores*, or of the *ethos*, or of *what is due*, or of being virtuous, that is, being manly. I believe that this is the case; the symbol of responsibility contains, as it were, hidden references, allusions, and similes which are in the depths of our mind as we grope for understanding of ourselves and towards definition of ourselves in action.<sup>8</sup>

But how shall we identify what are in fact these "hidden references, allusions, and similes which are in the depths of our mind?" Can they be the elements of response, of correspondence, of a pledge which I said I thought had now become less prominent? To me the mystery remains and I shall certainly be very grateful for suggestions as to how it might be fathomed.

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