

Reflection and Responsibility

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1. Introduction

A common line of thought claims that we are responsible for ourselves and our actions, while less sophisticated creatures are not, because we, but not they, are self-aware. Our self-awareness, it is thought, provides us with a kind of control over ourselves that they lack: we can reflect upon our thoughts and actions and so ensure that they are as we would have them to be. Thus, our capacity for reflection provides us with the kind of control over ourselves that grounds our responsibility.

I will argue that this thought is subtly, but badly, confused. It uses, as its model for the kind of control that grounds our responsibility, the kind of control we exercise over ordinary objects and over our own voluntary actions: we represent to ourselves what to do or how to change things, and then bring about that which we represent. But, I argue, we cannot use this model to explain our responsibility for ourselves and our actions: if there was a question about why or how we are responsible for ourselves and our actions, it cannot be answered by appeal to a sophisticated, self-directed action. There must be some more fundamental account of how or why we are responsible.

I will replace the usual account with a novel but natural view: responsible mental activity can be modeled, not as an ordinary action, but as the settling of a question. This requires abandoning the tempting but troublesome thought that responsible activity involves discretion and awareness—which, I argue, we must abandon in any case.

2. Overview: the common line of thought, together with my initial response.

- a. Intentional action suggests a certain kind of control as the ground for responsibility.
 - i. Intentional action is a paradigm case of responsible activity.
 - ii. Intentional action, in *its* paradigm instances, involves a certain sort of “having in mind:” we act intentionally by first deciding what to do and then doing that which we decided to do. We are, in some sense, the cause of our own representations.
 - iii. This “having in mind” provides us much of our sense of control over our own actions.
 - 1) Our sense of control over our own actions thus involves both a certain kind of *awareness*
 - 2) and a certain kind of voluntariness or *discretion*—we can decide to do whatever we think worth doing. [not that we can do anything, but we can do whatever we find worth doing]
 - iv. It is very natural to think that control of this kind is both a *ground* for and a *condition* on our responsibility.
- b. This suggestion leads to the free will debate
 - i. We run into difficulties when we start to reflect upon our lives: from that vantage, it seems we cannot represent and do whatever we think worth doing.
 - ii. The free will debate: a *very* rough overview
 - 1) One extreme: our activity is not fully explicable by facts outside of us/our contingent psychology.
 - 2) The other extreme: We are ultimately responsible for *being*, not for *doing*. We are responsible for our actions because they reveal our character, or our contingent psychology.
 - 3) Each seems unsatisfying. The first requires some kind of mystery. The second avoids the mystery by giving up the claim responsibility is grounded in and conditioned by our activity or control.
- c. Reflection as an attempted middle way, and my initial dissatisfaction with it
 - i. By appealing to reflection, or hierarchy, we seem to recreate the awareness and discretion of intentional action. We can reflect upon and change ourselves, and so we have a (limited) kind of control over that for which we are responsible.
 - ii. I believe this reflective strategy is mistaken. It suggests that we control ourselves, most fundamentally, by acting upon ourselves. But if there was a question about how or why we are responsible for our intentional actions, we cannot answer it by appeal to a self-directed action.

3. The first reply of the champion of reflection

- a. What she has in mind is not simply a self-directed intentional action, but rather is a special, *sui generis*, sort of activity, one which provides us with the control over ourselves required for responsibility by allowing us awareness of and discretion over ourselves.
- b. Reply: there may be such a *sui generis* activity, but we are owed an account both of what it is and why it, with whatever features it boasts, does the job of grounding or conditioning responsibility (whatever *that* is).

4. My alternative, as illustrating the kind of explanatory connection hoped for

- a. Responsibility, broadly: Someone is *responsible* for something just in case he or she is open to certain sorts of assessments and certain sorts of reactions on account of that thing.
 - i. One can be responsible, in this sense, for one’s intentional actions (if for anything).
 - ii. One can also be responsible, in this sense, for a wide range of things, e.g., the behavior of one’s dog.

- 1) These fall into your *jurisdiction*: you are responsible for them because you can affect and control them through your intentional actions; they are, in some sense, yours; and so you are open to assessment on account of them.
 - 2) Jurisdictional responsibility presupposes responsibility for our intentional actions.
 - iii. We cannot explain responsibility for intentional actions simply by saying that they fall into your jurisdiction. There must be some more fundamental way to explain our responsibility for our actions.
 - b. Answerability: You are *answerable* for your intentional actions, where one is answerable for ϕ -ing just in case one can be rightly asked for one's reasons for ϕ -ing.
 - i. *The agent's reasons for ϕ -ing* are the considerations (the facts or purported facts) the agent took to count in favor of ϕ -ing, the so taking of which explains (in part) his or her ϕ -ing.
 - ii. A question is *rightly asked* just in case the assumptions made in asking it are met.
 - iii. The assumption that gives application to a request for one's reasons for ϕ -ing is the assumption that one is ϕ -ing (or ϕ -ed) because one settled for oneself (positively) the question of whether to ϕ .
 - iv. (Therefore,) you are *answerable* for ϕ -ing just in case you are ϕ -ing (ϕ -ed) because you settled for yourself (positively) the question of whether to ϕ .
 - c. Answerability as the fundamental form of responsibility for intentional actions:
 - i. In revealing your answer to the question of whether to ϕ , your intentional actions reveal a stretch of your mind—how you think of the world and your place in it [the quality of your will].
 - ii. This stretch of mind is the object of the assessments and reactions one is open to, when responsible.
 - d. Settling a question as explaining responsibility: your intentional actions open you to certain assessments and reactions, because they reveal your answer to a question, and so reveal your take on the world and your place in it. (In settling questions we create our mind. This is a kind of control.)
 - e. However, crucially, this model does not allow discretion. You enjoy discretion when you can do a thing for any reason you take to show it worth doing.
 - i. If you take some reason to show settling a question a certain way to be worth doing, that will reveal your take, not on the question, but rather on the question of whether settling that question is worth doing. But this is a different question than the one that you originally thought worth settling.
 - ii. If we cannot bring about whatever we find worth bringing about, it is less clear why awareness of our minds, or of settlings, enhances control over those settlings. The first-order reflection seems to offer as much control as we could have over our answers. (Note on self-management, and how it is different.)
5. Second reply of the champion of reflection: She, too, is interested in a person's take on the world and her place in it, but reflection is required to reveal the mind—or, at any rate, the *responsible* mind—of the person. Reflection does not so much afford control as locate or identify the responsible person.
- a. Reply: why should reflection locate or identify the responsible mind? Not because that is the part of my mind that I can control in the way I control actions and ordinary objects: this recreates the problem.
 - b. Counter: Reflection as securing (what I will call) *authenticity*.
 - i. Reply: authenticity is not required for responsibility
6. A place for reflection? Some very preliminary thoughts
- a. First attempt: reflection and resentment
 - i. The relevant range of reactions, or kind of relation, is possible only for creatures capable of thinking, not only about another creature's *mind*, but also about another creature's *reasons*.
 - ii. If you can think about another's reasons for acting, it seems you can think about your own.
 - iii. So, there is a correlation between those creatures capable of self-reflection and those that resent.
 - b. Question: why only resent those who are *also* capable of thinking about reasons? Why not resent our cats?
 - i. Rejected answers:
 - 1) Creatures incapable of thinking about reasons do not act on reasons
 - 2) We rightly resent only that which can also be managed—i.e., controlled in the more ordinary way
 - a) Problem: reflection/management explains jurisdictional responsibility, not answerability
 - b) Problem: fairness is not at issue
 - ii. A non-rejected answer: Why should resentment make sense, or be appropriate, only if directed to those capable of recognizing the reasons for my resentment
 - 1) Not because they must be capable of changing their ways.
 - 2) Not because they must be capable of recognizing a particular episode of resentment.
 - 3) Rather, resentment marks the violation of expectations instituted between creatures capable of recognizing the quality of each other's will, and so capable of demanding mutual respect.

If this is right, we have an account of the correlation between responsibility and the capacity for self-reflection, but one which does not appeal to self-reflection as affording control over the self. Rather, the kind of relationships, expectations, and reactions that constitute us as responsible are interpersonal: they are reactions had by creatures who can recognize one another's reasons. The importance of reflection, then, is not in securing control. It is rather a capacity enjoyed by those capable of a certain kind of interpersonal recognition.