

Responsibility (Excerpt from van de Poel et al. 2012, *The Problem of Many Hands: Climate Change as an Example*, *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 18(1), pp. 49-67.)

Responsibility-as-Blameworthiness

Following the literature on responsibility, we will assume that an agent can reasonably be held responsible-as-blameworthy if and only if certain conditions are fulfilled. The conditions of responsibility have been discussed throughout the history of philosophy and there are countless different views on the relevance and priority of them. Still we think a common framework can be defined that contains the main types of conditions mentioned in the literature. We will not take a stance as to whether all conditions are equally important or the exact content of the conditions. The point of this discussion is merely to provide a framework that helps to discuss when it is reasonable to hold someone responsible.

Below, we will argue that the following conditions together capture the general notion of when it is reasonable to hold an agent morally responsible-as-blameworthy:

1. Capacity
2. Causality
3. Knowledge
4. Freedom
5. Wrong-doing

The first condition, ‘capacity’, is closely related to the question of moral agency. Philosophers and non-philosophers alike commonly exempt some groups of human beings from responsibility, for example children and people with mental disorders, because they lack the capacity to act responsibly (Wallace 1994; cf. Austin 1956–1957). In the literature, there has been discussion whether animals or even machines should be awarded moral agency and hence should be eligible for normative assessment, although few actually defend such positions (Shapiro 2006; Johnson 2006). The discussion of whether it is appropriate to ascribe responsibility to collective entities also focuses on this condition. It is essentially a question of whether collectives are eligible for normative assessment.

The second condition is that the agent in question actually caused that for which she is being held responsible-as-blameworthy. We call this the condition of causality. Some theorists treat causality as the condition for moral responsibility: if an agent causes harm to another she is responsible for that even if she could not have foreseen it or was not acting voluntarily. This is so because either there is an individual as well as societal interest to hold everyone who caused harm responsible or because people feel justified regret when they cause harm regardless of why or how they caused harm (Honoré 1999; Williams 1999; Zandvoort 2000; Vedder 2001).

Most people do not ascribe responsibility to an agent unless she appears to have contributed causally to that for which she is held responsible. The question is what sense of causation one should adopt, and how strong the causal link should be in order for someone to reasonably be held responsible. Similarly, causation is not the only condition most people refer to when holding others responsible.

Aristotle argued that an agent is not responsible-as-blameworthy if the action was performed involuntarily. To be voluntary, an action should not have been performed under compulsion or ignorance. We call the latter the knowledge condition (condition 3). Like the causality condition, the knowledge condition is much more complicated in the technological age than it was at the time of Aristotle’s analysis. One could argue that, for example, engineers are only responsible for what they actually know or are aware of. However, this neglects the reasonable notion that engineers also have a

duty to know or find out some things. This duty is entailed by their role as engineers, as professionals that have knowledge and experience that goes beyond the knowledge and experience of laypeople. The knowledge condition then has a normative aspect, it relates to what people should know or can reasonably be expected to know. People are only excused by non-culpable ignorance.

The second excusing condition has been called the freedom condition (our condition 4) or the control condition. If the agent was acting under compulsion she is not responsible (Aristotle 2000: Book 3). If an agent A is compelled to do X, it is not reasonable to hold her responsible for X or for the consequences of X. However, regarding the questions what constitutes coercion and when actions can reasonably be viewed as free, the disagreement is considerable. The extensive discussion between compatibilists and incompatibilists in the metaphysical debate about 'responsibility and free will' essentially concerns this condition. The focal point of that debate is whether it is reasonable to hold individuals responsible if human beings are causally determined. Some philosophers in this debate argue that the kind of control necessary for responsibility requires that we have alternatives (cf. van Inwagen 1983; Ginet 2006; Widerker 2005; Copp 2006) whereas others disagree (French et al. 2005; Frankfurt 1969; Widerker and McKenna 2006).

Thus, there is extensive discussion on the condition of freedom, its meaning and scope. However, few would argue that if an agent performs an act under compulsion, she is responsible-as-blameworthy; disagreement concerns when an act can be said to be free.

When we hold agents responsible-as-blameworthy it is usually the case that some harm has occurred or some norm has been transgressed. An agent has done something that is perceived as wrong (condition 5) and therefore she is blameworthy for that thing, given that she did it voluntarily and knowingly (Smiley 1992). Clearly, what counts as wrong-doing is at the core of the discipline of ethics, and utilitarian, deontological and virtue ethics give different answers to this question. However, what is important in this context is that there is enough agreement that when we hold an agent responsible it is partly because the agent is perceived to have done something wrong, regardless of whether the argument is based on utilitarian, deontological, virtue ethics or based on some other set of ethical principles or norms.

As we have seen, there is disagreement on which of the conditions are most important and how each condition should be interpreted. However, for our purpose in this paper, we only need to agree on the following issues: (a) there are a number of conditions for reasonably holding an agent responsible and (b) although there is disagreement on the exact meaning and relevance of these conditions, there is considerable agreement that a reasonable ascription of moral responsibility requires that the agent was eligible for normative assessment, caused the unwanted outcome, did it knowingly and freely (to an adequate extent), and that the agent's action constituted wrong-doing according to some normative framework.