

HOW TO UNDERSTAND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY?

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Abstract. More often than not, discussions of moral responsibility centre on questions of determinism and free will. This makes sense, since the latter are logically related to responsibility. On the other hand, though, it certainly makes it more difficult to understand moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is a social phenomenon that occurs in social relations, i.e. in relations that make it possible for the society to function. In my philosophical approach to the concept of moral responsibility I stress its social nature. This is important to avoid interpreting responsibility in ways that differ significantly from what we are used to in our daily life.

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, responsibility is a phenomenon closely connected with man's behaviour or its consequences. It is difficult to give a comprehensive definition of responsibility since this notion comprises several specific shades of meaning. To illustrate my point, let us consider the following statements that entail the notion of responsibility:

- (1) You are responsible for everything you do.
- (2) The fireman is responsible for the fire safety of this town.
- (3) Young boys are responsible for setting fire to the sheds.

The first statement is about causal responsibility since it says that every act that a person has done or will do in the future is in causal correspondence with this person. Since the person is viewed as the cause of action, then according to causal responsibility there can be no act without correspondence to some person. In the second statement responsibility is used in the sense of role responsibility. Responsibility here means the obligations connected with a specific profession or social roles that do not apply to other persons outside this role or profession. The meaning of responsibility is associated with specific tasks that each person has to perform in a definite role. In this connection, the meaning of 'responsibility' is similar to that of 'task', according to the statement (2) could mean that 'It is the task of the fireman to look after fire safety in town'. In the third statement 'responsibility' is used in the

sense of liability responsibility, i.e. signifying the occasions for which one is either praised or blamed. In this case responsibility denotes the condition on which one gets either praised or blamed for one's action or its consequences. What matters in liability responsibility is the mental health of the person concerned (whether he/she is capable of performing a definite action), his/her intentions (what is the desired aim of the action) and the outcome of the action, as well as the factors that he/she either can control (condition on which a certain action can or could be performed by the person) or cannot (condition on which a certain action cannot be performed for a number of definite reasons).

As a rule, we speak of moral responsibility particularly in the sense of liability responsibility, i.e. in which cases one can and should be either praised or blamed. Theoretical writings basically follow two different lines while discussing the question of when exactly one is morally responsible. In the first case, the objective conditions connected with moral responsibility are under inspection. In this context, issues of determinism, free will, responsibility and their interrelations are examined. For example, theoreticians debate on whether free will is compatible with determinism or not, and what follows from this in view of responsibility. Without delving into these problems, it seems to me that no matter how the issue is resolved, the aim of raising the question is clear enough: a definite author is trying to convince his/her reader or opponent in the specific nature of the relation between determinism and free will, and how responsibility should be understood within this framework. I would call such an approach to responsibility theoretical, since the solution of the relevant problem depends on the definite views of the debaters on determinism and free will, as well as on the logical interrelation of these concepts.

In the second instance, moral responsibility is regarded as a social phenomenon that appears in social relations and that has no immediate connection with issues of determinism and free will. This is due to the fact that in practical action people consider themselves as spontaneous agents who believe that at least in some cases they are the source of their actions. This spontaneous capability for action has also been taken into account in the social organization. It would make no sense to punish somebody for an action that the person could not have possibly avoided. Likewise, it would be senseless to praise or award somebody else for the work or achievement whose contribution to it has been non-existent. Ultimately it boils down to the fact that free will and responsibility are directly connected with our daily life, even though we do not know what free will, determinism or responsibility objectively are (Strawson 2001).

I would call the second approach a social one, for in the society responsibility is not so much a matter of explaining circumstances and phenomena objectively, but rather an issue of social reaction that accompanies our spontaneous action in certain types of activity. Responsibility as we experience it in practice could not be adequately viewed by means of theoretical approach, since responsibility in our daily life does not primarily depend on factors that we regard as theoretically interesting, but rather on social aspects (Strawson 2001, Wallace 1996). At this

point, I do not maintain that the social approach overlooks theoretical problems (for instance, the theoretical question arises in discussions about who could be considered to be weak-minded). However, unlike theoretical approach, the emphasis here is not laid on the problem of determinism and free will, but on the social explication of moral responsibility as a phenomenon.

The aim of my article is to explain how moral responsibility appears in society and to demonstrate that the reactive attitude of society should be taken into account while dealing with the problems of responsibility. In order to understand the social reactive attitude, we must expound its significance and reasons of manifestation. Since I am dealing with the social reactive attitude towards actions concerning morals, I intend to demonstrate why and how the former relates to the latter. The present treatment of morals attempts to explain the criteria that are at the basis of the social reactive attitude towards personal action, as well as the purpose that it serves. The question of which conditions determine whether one is subjected to praise or blame in society will be answered towards the end of this paper.

2. The problem of moral responsibility

It is sometimes quite surprising how people deal with the concept of responsibility, regarding it as something intuitively clear that needs no analysis. Here are a few examples to illustrate my point. For instance, Harry Frankfurt writes as follows:

“Suppose someone – Black, let us say – wants Jones to perform a certain action. Black is prepared to go to considerable lengths to get his way, but he prefers to avoid showing his hand unnecessarily. So he waits until Jones is about to make up his mind what to do, and he does nothing unless it is clear to him (Black is an excellent judge of such things) that Jones is going to decide to do something other than what he wants him to do. If it does become clear that Jones is going to do something else, Black takes effective steps to ensure that Jones decides to do, and that he does do, what he wants him to do” (Frankfurt 1991:107).

In the given example, Jones can want and do only what Black wishes, whereas he lacks any possibility to do anything other than that. But if that will by which he was moved when he did it was his will because it was the will he wanted, then he did it freely and of his own free will (Frankfurt 2001:89). Hence the question: is Jones responsible for what he does if he lacks any possibilities for alternative action? Frankfurt thinks that he is, if he can do what he wants, despite the fact that because of Black he has no possibilities for alternative actions. Frankfurt uses these statements to show that free will in the form of possibilities for alternative actions is not prerequisite for responsibility. John Locke’s reasoning reflects similar thinking: “...so far as a man has a power to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his mind, so far is a man free” (Lock 1979:237). What we have here is the implicitly emerging view that the free will prerequisite for responsibility boils down to the ability of man to

want something. Frankfurt's contribution lies in the fact that he explicitly cut the conceptual link between responsibility and alternative possibilities (Zagzebski 2000).

The second example comes from Robert Kane. Contrary to the above, Kane formulates the principle of responsibility:

“An agent is responsible for some (event or state) E's occurring only if the agent is personally responsible for E's occurring in a sense which entails that something the agent voluntarily (or willingly) did or omitted, and for which the agent could have voluntarily done otherwise, either was, or causally contributed to whether or not E occurred...” (Kane 1998:35).

It follows from this principle that responsibility requires alternative possibilities. There is yet another reason to presuppose alternative possibilities, for without these one could not be “the source or origin of one's own ends or purposes” (Kane 1998:70). Kane has borrowed this idea from Aristotle. In Book III of “Nicomachean Ethics“, Aristotle reasons in the following manner: as every man has ultimately one desire – happiness – then the virtuous strive for it by making choices, the non-virtuous mistakenly by seeking happiness in pleasure. At the same time, the non-virtuous have a possibility not to become wicked. Hence their wickedness: by seeking virtue, they have voluntarily made a wrong choice that they could have avoided. Any cause over which there is no control, yet which determines one's action, hinders from initiating one's own acts, for because of that one is not free and, as a consequence, not responsible for one's acts. Kane, too, faces the problem of the relationship between free will and responsibility, but unlike Frankfurt he admits, following Aristotle, that free will in the form of alternative possibilities, as a condition of one's responsibility is still prerequisite to an extent.

Considering the views of these two authors, both the treatment of Frankfurt that denies alternative possibilities and that of Kane presupposing these, seem acceptable at an intuitive level. Therefore, the logical question arises – which approach is better or should be preferred, since it is impossible that both mutually exclusive viewpoints are correct. It is undoubtedly difficult to decide when there is reason to stick to them both and equally no reason why either of them should be discarded.

I support the thesis that responsibility in the sense of the condition of moral punishment is a social phenomenon that can and should be understood by studying social relations. The view that responsibility is connected with the social reactive attitude has been presented by Peter Strawson (2001) and Jay Wallace (1996). Wherever responsibility as a phenomenon occurs, there must be rules, the following or evading of which are either praised or condemned by society. Social condemnation is caused by one's breach of certain rules, followed by a judgement that the act was not right¹. One gets praised, though, when one follows the rules and the act was right. By rules I mean the moral criteria existing in the given society

¹ I call an action right when it conforms to moral rules. Thus a right action is an action that the person is obliged to perform and that the society expects from him/her. An action is not right when the person that performs it has no right to do it and that is not favoured by the society.

that determine our moral rights and duties. Only after these requirements are met can we speak about moral responsibility.

3. Morality and cooperation

Moral rules, or the earliest criteria of social cooperation, are the product of social contract. This is the consequence in the name of which people had once to give up their unlimited freedom, in order to gain a secure social mode of living in return. This Hobbesian interpretation, originally used for explaining the emergence of the state, serves surprisingly well to describe the outcome that we have in the form of social cooperation². One could be satisfied with Hobbes's theory – according to which rational, yet egotistical humans that lead an inimical life in the state of nature, agree to form the society where order is maintained by the absolute and powerful Leviathan – had the process not been based on the somewhat dubious concept of human rationality that forces men to make a contract. All attempts made so far in finding the rational part that all men could share and that would eventually allow us to reach agreements that meet the general will, have come to nothing (Schumpeter 1973).

We have no sufficient grounds to believe that the great achievements of man, for instance, society and state, have been formed by means of rational intellect. If this were so, we should admit that the societies (or even states) of ants and bees have also been formed rationally. However, we tend not to make such conclusions. The part of the social contract theory that deals with the pre-social state of nature, characterized in negative terms by Hobbes, in which human life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (1996:89), sounds unconvincing as well. Accordingly, the situation was solved by means of the rational decision of people to create the society, in the name of which certain liberties had to be sacrificed. A question arises at this point, viz. whence sprang the idea that life in society would be better than in the state of nature? And even though people decided that it was more preferable to give up certain liberties to gain safety and security, I still doubt the rationality of the decision to make friends with people who until then had been the bitterest enemies. Why should the pre-social man imagine that the Leviathan, such as Hobbes described it, would be able to offer protection to all of them? What strikes me as most strange here is the fact that the Leviathan often cannot indeed do this. According to Hobbes, in this case it is no longer rational for men to obey it, although they mostly still do so. People obey the state not out of an odd sense of duty, but because it is rational (Simmons 1979). Likewise, people retain societies, trying not to selfishly harm each other, and displaying concern and competence, because this is rational for them. It is a known fact that people are willing to spend resources for altruistic punishment, meaning that they are ready to spend resources

² State and society should not be treated as identical. According to the classical theory of social contract (Hobbes, Locke), there existed no society prior to the contract, in which cooperation would have been possible. A cooperating society could emerge only after the contract.

for punishing free riders in the society without getting any material benefit from it, in the interest of social cooperation (Fehr & Gächter 2002). I would contend that people continue to cooperate since this is rational, which does not mean, however, that the beginning of the cooperation as Hobbes describes it was rational.

What alternatives can I propose in the matter of social contract? Maybe we should regard evolution as the cause of the emergence of moral rules? According to Darwin's theory of evolution, we should, firstly, presuppose the existence of pressure that forced the anthropoid ancestors of modern man to cooperate socially. Behind this pressure lies natural competition that compels species to find new and more successful ways of survival. Secondly, evolution must have favoured replicators³ that enabled their carriers to cope successfully in the society. This, together with successful replicators necessitated the need to adhere to such principles that enabled man to cope with his kind in the society. Such earliest principles could be viewed as first moral rules that grew more complicated as the social relations developed further in time. Having made these points, I can now proceed to my view of morals: this is nothing but a complex of rules that enables men to cooperate. It follows from this that men find it rational to adhere to moral rules and to punish those that break them, since they are interested in continuing the cooperation.

This allows us to explain the social reactive attitude towards definite actions, expressed either by praising the agent (good reputation, respect) or blaming him/her, depending on whether the action in question is moral or immoral. The fact that responsibility accompanies social praise or condemnation is overlooked by many philosophers (Dennett 1984, Fischer 1982, Frankfurt 2001, Kane 1998) who ponder over whether responsibility requires alternative possibilities or not. As a matter of fact, the results of this attitude are not really harmless, since dismissing the mechanisms of how responsibility works, they offer theoretical explications of the prerequisites of responsibility. But in society, responsibility is subject to definite rules that cannot be successfully apprehended by theory and logic. The question whether responsibility presupposes free will, should not be addressed logically and abstractly, but pragmatically, by studying the ways the society functions.

4. Motives and consequences

There is nothing revolutionary about the discovery that responsibility is associated with praise or blame. Aristotle noticed this as he wrote, "...on voluntary passions and actions praise and blame are bestowed..." (1109^b30–31).

³ Any replicator is an entity of natural selection, which is being copied. The most well-known replicator is the gene that need not be the only one, though. Wherever there is life, "...all life evolves by the differential survival of replicating entities" (Dawkins 1999:192). Dawkins is of the opinion "...that new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet" (1999:192). This entity "...that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission" is meme. Memes play an important role in the evolution of man and society (Blackmore 1999). Since socially relevant replicators are treated collectively (the gene-meme coevolution), I do not consider it necessary to specify which replicators in particular are held in view, this being of secondary importance in my article.

According to Aristotle, voluntary actions are the ones, the moving principle of which is in the man who acts. Frankfurt, too, seems to be of the same opinion. In general, there is a certain convention that sees responsibility in actions, the cause of which is in the agent. However, Aristotle would probably not have agreed with Frankfurt since according to him one gets praised or blamed not for what was done but for whether the motive of the action was right or wrong. If one is praised or blamed only for the consequence of the action, there could be no direct relation between actions and moral norms. Aristotle points out in “*Nicomachean Ethics*” that sometimes actions are performed because of compelling circumstances, for example, with the noble aim of preventing greater damage. This could be, for instance, the throwing of the cargo overboard or doing something else that is normally considered condemnable. If one gets praised or blamed according to the consequence of the action, then the drowning of the cargo is sufficient for condemning the one that did it, for no person in his right mind would throw the cargo overboard. This is a logical conclusion but it does not correspond to reality, for as Aristotle puts it: “For such action men are sometimes even praised, when they endure something base or painful in return for great and noble objects gained...” (1110^a20–21). It is not the outcome that is commendable but the fact that one did what was necessary. The consequence is really of secondary importance in relation to endowing praise or blame, and is significant due to the causal relation of cause and result. As a matter of fact, it is quite common that condemnable consequences are caused by the wrongly chosen motive, and it is very likely that the undesirable consequence was caused by the wrong choice of the motive. As such, the consequence is an indicator that makes us look at the agent and the situation where the action started. The role of the consequence is limited to that of an indicator in the process of praising or blaming somebody.

By and large, the person who commits a commendable action based on the deplorable motive tends to be blamed. Let us consider a crude example of competition in business where every businessman is interested in increasing his profit. Since resources are limited and the welfare of the business depends on the number of clients that are divided between competing companies, the aim of each businessman is to win over the clients of the competitor. There are several moral possibilities of doing this: prices, innovative products, quality, etc. In addition, some of the businessmen may resort to immoral methods like slander, swindle or commercial espionage. Let us suppose that one of the three businessmen who have divided the market between them decides to use dishonest methods for winning over the clients. He creates a strategy of slighting openly and groundlessly the products of his competitors and accuses them of cheating the clients. Although the campaign was launched in order to make a profit at the expense of others, its result was the opposite. The campaign affected the clients as publicity for the competitors, and won them clients from the organizer of the campaign.

Without knowing the motives, we could consider the consequences – publicity for the competitors – as commendable. But we could hardly do that when we know that it was a failure on the part of the businessman who could not realize his

planned objective. Despite moral consequences, failure, as a rule, hardly ever earns the praise, since the businessman planned to do something that should have been avoided. At the same time, if he had sincerely wished to create publicity for his competitors, we would praise him. In the present case, though, the failure seems just ridiculous. Many didactic tales (including fairy-tales) are based on the similar ridiculing motive: the person who plans evil either cannot or does not know how to carry out his plan, and will eventually fall victim to it himself. Hence the moral – never wish others ill, even when the outcome is good.

Things are certainly more complicated in real life, since a morally acceptable result does not, as a rule; compel us to pay attention to the motive of the action. We are often content with just what has been completed, since this is of primary importance in social practice, and therefore ignore the motives, as those are, due to the result, regarded as commendable. This does not, however, refute the view that praise or blame is endowed for the right or wrong motive, not for the result. We run the risk here of being misled in complicated situations, for we tend to believe that the favourable result is connected with a right motive (as is often the case), yet it need not necessarily be so. Thus we may sometimes praise a person without reason for something he/she has done and feel indignant when we find out the truth, for on top of everything he/she has managed to fool us. The result does not compensate for the resentment we feel at the immoral intention, but the absence of direct harm may mitigate our anger towards that person. This is why we tend to forgive the unfortunate blunderer more easily by laughing at him/her.

What makes things more complicated in real life is the fact that besides motives, we must also take into account the factors, over which the agent has no control. For example, the movement of the airplane is affected not just by the pilot, but also by the wind, flying birds and technical failures, over which the pilot has no control. It is possible that an experienced pilot knows how to avoid many of the uncontrollable factors. The pilot may avoid flying through a thundercloud or not attempt the take-off or landing if the weather conditions are unfavourable. Knowing the routes of birds, he may avoid collision by changing the flight trajectory. In addition to avoidable factors, there exist others that the pilot may not be able to avoid, for instance, a sudden engine failure or a terrorist on board. In some instances the pilot may be able to avoid tragic consequences. A good pilot can sometimes safely land the plane whose engine has stopped functioning. But here, too, we must take the favourable conditions into account. If the engine fails above the sea or mountains, the skills of the pilot may not, as a rule, be sufficient for avoiding the catastrophe, which could have been possible, say, above the fields of grain. The factors that count here are many and each of those contributes to the final result. Since we cannot control all the factors that influence the action, we have reason to look for responsibility in the action itself. We expect the pilot to do everything in his power, i.e. the maximum. We expect him to make the best out of possible decisions, or at least to exclude the decisions, the relation of which to undesirable consequences is obvious to everybody.

5. Doing ill while meaning well

The discussion above was meant to show which factors connected with actions cause resentment in other people, or make them praise the one who acts. But there is another possibility that I have not yet considered – an evil deed may spring from noble intention. The story of a strong servant that wishes to get rid of the fly, so that his master could sleep peacefully, serves us well at this point. Since he cannot do it otherwise, he decides to kill it as it sat on the forehead of the sleeping master. His strong blow meant to squash the insect also smashes the head of the master, thus causing his death.

There is no doubt that the deed meant well is viewed by society as immoral and it is likely to cause resentment. Yet this takes me back to the issue of whether our resentment is not caused by the result after all, since we cannot condemn one for good intentions. If we condemn the servant for killing, then we must do it on the basis of the consequence of his action. This conclusion sounds logical, yet is evidently wrong. In social practice one would probably not make such a conclusion, for we do not reason logically in a situation like this, but follow our feelings. Strawson has that in view when he writes: “If someone treads on my hand accidentally, while trying to help me, my pain may be no less acute than if he treads on it in contemptuous disregard of my existence or with a malevolent wish to injure me. But I shall generally feel in the second case a certain amount of resentment that I shall not feel in the first” (2001:187). Our emotions probably depend to a large extent on the attitude of others towards us. It seems to me, though, that besides that, we generally feel resentment also towards people that have performed actions that are actually well meant, yet out of lack of experience or just carelessness have harmed us.

In practice we encounter cases where one means well, but does ill. For example, doctors make mistakes while treating patients, which can have fatal consequences for the latter. Bus and car drivers rush in order to shorten the time of the trip both for the sake of passengers and themselves. In our daily life we may violate elementary first aid principles while trying to help, thus harming the one in need, rather than helping him/her. In many such instances we feel resentment towards the agent. The question arises – why do we feel this way when it is obvious that the agent had good intentions? I see two possible answers here. According to the first, we should try and find out whether the motives, in fact, were good. This is a justified doubt since nobody except the agent has access to the motives. Such an answer is based on the prerequisite that noble motives are connected with moral actions and mean motives with immoral ones. According to this, all immoral actions should have proceeded from condemnable motives. But this answer is obviously too simplifying for us to accept. It is quite easy to think of an example that casts doubt on that kind of answer. Let us suppose that a car with two friends in it rushes off the road at great speed, rolls over its roof, and then crashes into a tree. Both passengers are hurt, but the injuries of one are less serious, so he manages to climb out of the car on his own. Fearing that the car

might explode, he decides to help his injured friend out of the car. While doing this, he causes his friend fatal spine damage since he ignores elementary first aid techniques. If he had had immoral intentions, then why should he, injured as he was, have bothered to help somebody out of the car while believing that the car would explode anyway? Let us suppose that his very intention was to cause spine damage. This would not make things easier since how could he have known that his action would damage his friend's spine? It would have been easier and more efficient to strike at the back right away, in order to cause the damage. I could go on and on with questions like these but I think it suffices to show that an immoral action is not necessarily connected with evil motives.

According to the second answer, one feels resentment towards the agent since with his action he has violated some rules. If a person faces the choice whether to help a friend in need or not, then according to our moral intuition we should help him. We should discriminate between two important nuances here. Firstly, our intuition is based on moral rules that we have acquired in the process of learning and personal experience (Hare 1981). Secondly, we follow moral rules due to some general principle or rule of cooperation. The rule of cooperation, generally known as the golden rule of morals, says: do as you would be done by. However, moral rules and the rule of cooperation do not coincide, as Kant (1999) pointed out while warning that the categorical imperative should not be treated as the "golden rule", since the latter does not entail any obligation whatsoever, differently from moral rules.

6. Rule of cooperation

The rule of cooperation should be viewed as the rule of application for the moral rules, the function of which is to tell us how we should behave in society. The function of the rule of cooperation is revealed by its principles of operation: we wish others to treat us in the way we consider right or as we would treat others. If we ourselves proceed from moral principles, then we expect the same from the others. This explains why altruistic punishment is applied to those who do not follow the generally accepted moral rules (Fehr & Gächter 2002). Since we expect others to follow the same rules that we do, we feel resentment when they fail to do so, which feeling will eventually be expressed in the form of condemnation.

One could imagine that once we judge other people according to our own views, then the judgement must be subjective. It is easy to dispel such an impression. Many people probably remember how they were ordered not to do this or that when they were young. Mother tells the child who plays at being an excavator driver over a bowl of porridge that it is not nice to play with food. We often hear parents warning: "Don't walk in puddles!", "Don't run in the street!", "Don't put dirty hands into your mouth!" etc. We know how embarrassed parents are when their child is being obstinate in a shop and demands things that the parents think it should not get. Some parents try to explain it to the kid patiently;

others pick the kid up and rush out of the shop. Children understand the reaction of parents perfectly well and learn how to behave themselves. However, we do not learn only in our youth and just from our parents, but we do it throughout our lives and everywhere. Many people have experienced embarrassment in public transport when they have not offered an elderly person a seat and the latter comments on that. In traffic, every signal or pointed finger caused by our driving mistake affects our mood. As a rule, when one of a party of people acts rudely, the others react negatively. These examples demonstrate that society shapes the individual's value assessments. But just as we have been shaped by the reactions of other people, we ourselves affect them as well. Our views are seldom subjective, more often than not, they have been formed by other people, and we ourselves communicate those conventional attitudes to others. Thus every one of us expresses not subjective but socially intrasubjective reaction towards other people. We may, therefore, say that our attitudes reflect the collective feelings of society.

Most adults know very well what is right and know how to avoid immoral actions. By and large, we tend to be intolerant towards the mistakes made by other people, although we sometimes think it acceptable if we make mistakes ourselves. This is caused by the fact that people often overestimate their own personal problems that they either do not see or do not want to see in other people's lives. We see our own situation in minute detail, in which some personal aspect that we entirely ignore in the case of others might prove to be decisive. It may happen, though, that a person may feel resentment towards his/her own action the way we feel towards others when they break a moral rule. This is possible when we have moral rules that determine what is right in a certain situation, as well as the rule of cooperation, on the basis of which we may expect other people to follow moral rules.

In order to avoid as much as possible the kind of situations where good intentions bring about immoral actions, society expects its members to stick to certain principles. We expect different action from a friend who wishes to help his companion in coma, but actually hurts him instead. We appreciate his good will, yet condemn the way he realized it. Naturally, our reaction depends on actual details. If we lived in a society where elementary first aid techniques were taught at compulsory school level and everyone knew these, our resentment would probably have been greater than it is in the society where only few people know how to help injured fellow citizens. This difference stems from the fact that in the former society we would know exactly what should be done in a similar situation, and expect the same competence from others, whereas in the latter society where only few people know elementary first aid techniques and we ourselves do not know how to provide efficient aid, we cannot blame others for a mistake like that. We have no problems with the example in which the servant, wishing his master well, kills him, for we know how to catch a fly that sits on the forehead of a sleeping person – that should be done carefully. We would condemn a person who uses a board or an iron bar for catching a fly. Even the use of a fly lash in a situation like that would have been controversial since this, too, could harm one. Maybe a thin newspaper rolled up or light cloth would have been suitable? In any

case it is obvious that the means should not predictably hurt the sleeper. Since the action of the servant was predictably harmful, there is no doubt that he would be condemned for this.

More specifically, we could define the rule of cooperation as follows: it is the rule that prohibits all actions that result in consequences, the harmful nature of which can be grasped clearly and unequivocally by everybody. If one still fails to grasp the harmful nature of the action, the latter is viewed as careless or unjustifiably incompetent, this ultimately does not serve as an excuse. A person can be excused if the action was not caused by his carelessness or unjustifiably incompetence (Zimmerman 1997). Whether a person is careless or unjustifiably incompetent will be judged by other members of society, and this depends on the moral rules and rule of cooperation. Should it happen that despite the efforts of the person his action still has immoral consequences, he/she may not be condemned by fellow citizens. On the contrary, we may praise one for an action whose consequences are unfavourable, in case one did what had to be done in certain circumstances. But things are different if one has overlooked certain important aspects out of carelessness, or has been incompetent in matters that he should have known. In this case he will be condemned, even if his intentions were noble.

7. Different capability

It is generally known that people regard the actions of sick and healthy persons differently. A sick person who due to his condition cannot follow the same principles as the healthy one is not condemned on the same basis as a healthy person. The difference in attitudes towards healthy and sick people is due to the difference between the two. The difference occurs when we try to view the other person 'objectively' and to assess his state on the basis of certain characteristic features, which we then compare with our own state (Strawson 2001). If the difference between him and us is fairly big, then this is a sign for us that the person is not capable of following moral rules. If his state does not allow him to behave in a way that is generally expected from an ordinary member of society, then we cannot condemn him for his actions, since he is not like us, and cannot therefore act in accordance with the same rules. We cannot exclude, though, that we might have unpleasant feelings about the uncontrollable action of a person, but this could not be qualified as condemnation.

It is easy to judge those few that differ from us radically because of their condition. It is more difficult to deal with border cases where we do not have a definite criterion for deciding. Those are the cases when a person explains his/her decision like this: "I don't know what came over me", "I really didn't want to do it", "I acted as if in a dream". All these explanations refer to the extraordinary state of the person who performed the action. Appealing to this, he/she hopes to explain his/her immoral action. Whether or not we accept these explanations depends on us, and on how justified the explanations sound. Knowing that the person in question has had health problems for years, his/her explanation may seem to us

justified. However, if somebody else who has never complained about his/her health nor seen a doctor comes forth with the same argument, we would certainly have doubts about it. All in all, the decision about a person's capability for responsibility depends on the credibility of available information that lends objectivity to the decision.

The same is true of the responsibility of children who are viewed differently from adults. The actions of children are excused by referring to their inexperience and ignorance, something that does not count in the case of grown-ups, as a rule. Children are praised and condemned for actions in order to make them respect the norms. Thus it is not surprising that our reaction to a child's actions differs from how we react to the actions of grown-up people: our condemnation is not so severe and our praise is often more emphatic. At the same time, our reaction to a child's actions may be more acute if we have reason to expect that its actions should already conform to moral rules and the rule of cooperation.

8. Alternative possibilities

Our readiness to free those who are not like us from responsibility suggests that responsibility is connected with alternative possibilities. We are convinced that we can avoid immoral actions, thus our actions must have alternative possibilities. While I write this article, I know that I can throw it away and start a new one on the topic of "The Impossibility of Responsibility". I have created this text by using program Word 5.0. My PC at home and the one at work that I can use if I wish both have Word 7.0. I am convinced that I have the liberty to process my text with program Word 7.0 whenever I feel like it. And why shouldn't I? At one point, I might get bored with the stuffy rooms of the library, which is one good reason for taking my work either home or to the office. Could I really do something else, should I feel like it? According to Daniel Dennett, this is an illusion since:

"If our responsibility really did hinge...on the question of whether we ever could do otherwise than we in fact do *in exactly those circumstances*, we would be faced with a most peculiar problem of ignorance: it would be unlikely in the extreme, given what now seems to be the case in physics, that anyone would ever know whether anyone has ever been responsible" (Dennett 1984:135).

Dennett is sure that we do not have alternative possibilities and that this is not even necessary as far as responsibility is concerned. I could continue this line of thinking: in order to have either wish or intention, there must be a prior cause, in respect to which the wish or intention is a result. If the wish is preceded by a pattern in our brain that causes the wish, and this in its turn is preceded by a cause of its own, and so on ad infinitum, could our will then be free? If we may have doubts about our freedom of will, we should also have doubts about our freedom of action. Following this line of reasoning, we eventually end up doubting whether we can be responsible for our actions. I think that we cannot have the latter doubt, not seriously so, for in our daily life we are responsible for what we do.

We praise and blame others and are sometimes praised and blamed ourselves. This is not a fact that can be denied, nor are the majority of philosophers doing so. Some of them are of the opinion that the function of praise and blame is the prevention of undesirable actions in the future. Dennett thinks it possible if man's reason has a certain role in shaping his actions. Reason suggests a reasonable way to act, whereby man can take into account the requirements set to his action. One is either praised or blamed as a result, in order to prevent immoral actions in the future.

Dennett has been criticized by Gerald Dworkin (1995) and Kane (1998) who claim that his treatment of responsibility is too narrow. Responsibility should be understood more comprehensively: it entails both actions already done, as well as future actions. This criticism seems fair enough, yet a question remains – how should we explain responsibility so that it would entail both actions already done and those that have not been done as yet? The solution proceeds from the interpretation that we expect people like us to act on the basis of the same principles that we do, and we feel resentment if they fail to do so. If the function of condemnation would just be the prevention of undesirable actions in the future, emotions would be unnecessary. Short moral lecturing or pointing one's finger, the way we treat children, would be enough to show that something wrong has been done. If a couple of mild words are enough for a child to keep it from misbehaving in the future, then why would it not work with a grown-up? It would suffice if the aim of condemnation would just be to prevent future actions. But in our daily life we react painfully also to immoral actions that have already been committed. Exclamations like "How on earth could he do this!", "You should be ashamed of yourself!" and "Did you really have to do this!" express unequivocal condemnation for something already done. Just as we feel resentment towards a swindler who has chosen a dishonest strategy in a game, we get angry at dishonesty in real life, too. In both cases we show our attitude towards the swindler by either giving up playing with him, or by devising sanctions that would curb his desire to break rules in the future. It is only natural that social reaction would have an impact on future actions. But this impact is indirect. Once we see that an action evoked resentment in society, there is reason to believe that it is likely to happen again in the future. Praise and condemnation are the means by which the society demonstrates its attitude towards an action. Once we do it again, we have reason to expect a similar reaction, if the society is not interested in our doing it again, and is trying to prevent it.

It is worthwhile to pay attention to a seemingly insignificant, yet important phenomenon: the regret we feel at times when we ourselves have done something wrong. Sometimes it is mingled with resentment, but it would be misleading to associate it with our future actions. However, we are not angry at what might happen in the future. Instead, we resent our own failure to be clever or resourceful enough to choose the right action. Thus we might regret that we did not finish our education, or else that we are too impetuous. We are angry at ourselves since we find that it is our own fault. It follows from the latter circumstance that the wrong

decision could have been avoided, if one had done something, over which he had control, differently from what he actually did. Such reasoning makes sense only if there are alternative possibilities for one's actions.

I doubt whether we could practically understand responsibility at all, if we knew that we lack alternative possibilities. Now that I have presented my vision of responsibility, it would be hard for me to imagine that our interpretation of responsibility would not entail a possibility to treat it differently. What could I say to philosophers that have maintained the opposite? First of all that while they approach the matter theoretically, they often forget about its practical role. They describe the connections involved in the issue of responsibility as befits the scholarly tradition, yet they fail to explicate why this is so. It would be difficult to present the explanation in a comprehensive theory, for that would require the combination of two essentially irreconcilable approaches to the problem of responsibility – the theoretical and the practical one. Perhaps this is not just a problem of the incompatibility of philosophers' views, but that of the two worlds – the theoretical world with its objective relations and the practical world with its social ones? In trying to combine the two, one gets into difficulties if one fails to accept that responsibility is a practical phenomenon, which cannot be explained on the basis of the model of the theoretical world. When philosophers endeavour to reduce a social phenomenon to a physical explanation, they may be making a mistake that Gilbert Ryle (1990) would call the over-intellectualization of responsibility. The latter means that an attempt to find complex relations in simple phenomena will lead to overall confusion.

9. Conclusion

I hope that the arguments presented in this article would help to clarify to a certain extent the confusion connected with the issue of moral responsibility. I approached the problem of moral responsibility from the social angle, i.e. according to my view of how it occurs in society. It is not expedient to treat moral responsibility separately from morals, for the former is connected with how and to which purpose the latter functions in society. Since the aim of morals is to regulate social cooperation, we should view moral rules as principles that make cooperation possible if the majority of the members of society follow these. Moral rules determine which behaviour is right and desirable, and which is not. As the members of society themselves see to it that moral rules are observed, the action of those that ignore the social rules causes resentment towards them, expressed in condemnation. This reaction is based on the rule of cooperation, according to which everybody is expected to follow certain moral rules in certain situations. However, should it appear that the state of the person concerned does not allow him/her to follow moral rules or the rule of cooperation, and then it does not elicit the kind of condemnation from the society as it would have done, had the person been healthy and grown-up. The capability of following moral rules and the rule of cooperation is assessed in the process of comparison, whereby we decide whether

the person is like us, for we decide on the basis of our own state how one could or should have acted in a certain situation. By comparing oneself and the other person, we assess whether the other behaved in a similar situation according to the rules – if the person failed to do that, he/she is condemned for carelessness and unjustified ignorance. However, if the person has done everything in his/her power to avoid undesirable consequences, but has failed nevertheless; this person is not condemned, for he/she could not possibly have done more than he/she did. Therefore we must conclude that moral responsibility requires alternative possibilities. Finally, these are the conditions on which moral responsibility depends, and which can be specified by applying the social approach to the issue of moral responsibility.

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