Sincere Apology Without Moral Responsibility

Alice is a moral responsibility abolitionist. She firmly believes that no one (including herself) is ever morally responsible, that rewards and punishments can never be justified on the basis of just deserts, and that blaming people for vicious character traits and vile acts is never morally justified. One day, Barbara, Alice’s dearest friend, confides to Alice a special secret: a secret Barbara clearly does not want revealed to others, a secret shared only with a special and specially trusted friend. A week later, Alice—in a moment of weakness, but with conscious awareness of betraying a deep confidence—tells Barbara’s secret to Carl, who spreads the secret to a wide circle of people. Barbara soon discovers that her secret has been betrayed, and her feelings are profoundly hurt. Can Alice—who denies all moral responsibility—sincerely apologize to Barbara?

Moral responsibility abolitionists can indeed make sincere apologies. The denial of moral responsibility promotes sincere apology, and (it will be argued) insistence on moral responsibility is an impediment to sincere apology. This claim that apology is compatible with the denial of moral responsibility is not based on some attenuated version of apology: the politician’s pseudo-apology, in the form of “I’m sorry if anyone took offense at my words,” or “I’m sorry if anyone misinterpreted my statement in such a way as to feel insulted.” Denial of moral responsibility is consistent with, and contributes to, full categorical apologies: apologies in which the moral responsibility abolitionist honestly acknowledges having done wrong, sincerely regrets the moral flaw in his or her character, resolves to avoid such wrongful acts in the future, and desires to repair or mitigate the harm caused. Moral responsibility abolitionists can consistently make such categorical apologies; and the denial of moral responsibility will facilitate sincere full apology.

The assertion that denial of moral responsibility is compatible with sincere apology does have some limits. Obviously if you set the stan-


© Copyright 2007 by Social Theory and Practice, Vol. 33, No. 3 (July 2007)
standards for moral responsibility low enough—for example, Daniel Dennett suggests that anyone meeting a very minimal standard of rationality is morally responsible—then it follows that anyone who is not morally responsible is incapable of reasoning, and thus is incapable of recognizing what counts as a wrongful act, and therefore is incapable of genuine apology for such acts. But the question is not whether the denial of moral responsibility on some grounds would preclude apology, but whether there is something inherent in the denial of moral responsibility that makes sincere apology impossible. The proper test for that question is whether—given the common grounds for denying moral responsibility generally favored by moral responsibility abolitionists—sincere apology remains viable. And the claim is that sincere apology can function and flourish under a standard universal denial of moral responsibility.

**Virtue and Vice Without Moral Responsibility**

Before laying out the positive arguments, some initial objections must be answered. Some insist that a moral responsibility abolitionist cannot consistently count any acts as right or wrong. That is a view expressed forcefully by Peter van Inwagen:

I have listened to philosophers who deny the existence of moral responsibility. I cannot take them seriously. I know a philosopher who has written a paper in which he denies the reality of moral responsibility. And yet this same philosopher, when certain of his books were stolen, said, “That was a shoddy thing to do!” But no one can consistently say that a certain act was a shoddy thing to do and say that its agent was not morally responsible when he performed it.

C.A. Campbell asserts that denying justly deserved praise and blame means denying “the reality of the moral life.” J. Angelo Corlett gives a blunt assessment of the implications of denying moral responsibility: “if causal determinism is true in the hard deterministic sense, then there is no sense to be made of ethics and moral responsibility, and not even moral practices such as forgiving others make much sense.” Susan Wolf insists that without moral responsibility we must “stop thinking in terms of what ought and ought not to be.” A fortiori, Alice cannot sincerely apologize because she can never believe that she has done anything wrong.

---

But why should it be impossible for Alice consistently to deny that she is morally responsible for her bad act while also maintaining that the act was her own morally egregious act of betraying a friend’s trust? Of course if Alice were not morally responsible because she is insane, or deeply deranged, or incapable of reason, or driven by the fates and devoid of any control over her own acts, then it would make little sense to think of Alice’s act as morally bad—any more than we think of the destructive force of a hurricane as morally bad. Indeed, we might doubt that it is Alice’s act at all. But Alice is not deranged, not irrational, not the pawn of capricious fate. She is an intelligent, reflective, self-directed person with considerable strength of character. She is not, however, perfect. She sometimes does wrong, and her wrong acts stem from deep flaws in her own character: flaws she acknowledges as her own, faults that—in the words of Shakespeare’s Antony—lie “not in our stars, but in ourselves.” Alice is at fault, her act flowed from her own flawed character, the harm caused is due to Alice’s intentional bad act. But Alice can acknowledge all that, and still deny that she deserves blame for either her flawed character or her flawed behavior (because, Alice might insist, both are ultimately the result of causes she could not control).

Perhaps Alice’s flawed behavior results not so much from her character flaws as from her immediate situation, as suggested by John Doris and a substantial body of situationist psychological research. But if that is the case, it will raise even more doubts concerning Alice’s moral responsibility. In any case, situationist psychology obviously does not lend support to the libertarian model of control, and rejecting that model is the basis for the denial of moral responsibility examined here. Furthermore, even strong situationist assumptions would not undercut all character traits, nor the legitimacy of apologizing for acts stemming from character flaws. One of the most famous situationist experiments was the Milgram obedience experiment, in which a majority of subjects administered (what they thought to be) severe shocks to another person, under the guidance and influence of a strong authority figure. The experiment demonstrated that situational factors have a much stronger influence on our behavior than we imagined. Still, some participants (a minority) had sufficient strength of self-reliance to resist the situational pressures of authority. If I were a participant who (like most) lacked such strong resistance to authority, I would deeply regret my lack of strength for resisting dangerous authoritative direction. The fact that I share that character weakness with many others would not eliminate my regret at my own acknowledged character flaw. Furthermore, recognizing my genuine

moral flaw would be consistent with believing that I am not morally responsible for the character flaw and the resulting harmful behavior. I might well conclude that the strong tendency of Milgram’s subjects to follow authority indicates that this is a powerful tendency among members of my species, and that those rare individuals who have the special strength to resist authority were particularly lucky in their early development; but that I am not morally responsible for my naturally flawed character, just as the virtuous exceptions are not morally responsible for the strength of character resulting from their lucky special childhood nurturing.

The compatibility between denying moral responsibility and making moral judgments was clearly recognized by Martin Luther, who fervently denied that humans are morally responsible. We are chosen by an omnipotent God for either damnation or grace; if the former, we are irredeemably evil; if the latter, we become good, even saintly—by God’s grace, not of our own works, “lest any man should boast.” But though Luther denied that we have the tiniest degree of moral responsibility for our good or evil characters (even the slightest tinge of human moral responsibility would deprive God of His majestic omnipotence), he retained a very lively sense of right and wrong, good and evil. While we may find Luther’s divine command account of ethics implausible, there is no reason to conclude that he was being inconsistent, much less incoherent, in making strong moral claims concerning humans and their behavior while denying all human moral responsibility. Moving to more contemporary cases, I believe that my character and all my behavior were shaped by causal forces—by genetic and environmental and social factors—that I ultimately did not control, and therefore it is unfair to blame or punish me for my bad acts and my character flaws; but nothing in that implies that my character flaws and bad acts are not genuinely bad, and that my virtuous character traits (which are the product of my good genetic and environmental fortune—and perhaps my own good efforts, which are in turn the product of my genetic and environmental history) are not genuinely good. Perhaps there are fatal flaws in both the contemporary and the Reformation arguments against moral responsibility. The purpose of this paper is not to argue for the denial of moral responsibility, but only to insist that those enlightened souls who do deny all moral responsibility can nonetheless make moral claims and sincere apologies.

Finding “Fault”

If it is granted that the denial of moral responsibility is consistent with claims of right and wrong, the central question remains: Can one who denies all moral responsibility still sincerely and consistently apologize
for her bad behavior? If Alice sincerely apologizes, she must acknowledge that the bad act was her own fault. But it may seem obvious that one who denies moral responsibility cannot meet that condition. Can Alice—the moral responsibility abolitionist—consistently acknowledge that her bad act was her own fault?

When we say the failure was Alice’s fault (and Alice is not a hurricane nor a psychopath), we may mean two distinctly different things. First, we may mean only that the source of the problem is within Alice: it is Alice’s own character flaw, not an external force. The fault is in Alice herself: a part of Alice’s own character that—though she may dislike it—she acknowledges as her own. This narrow sense of “it was Alice’s fault” might be designated character fault. Or second, we might mean that “it was Alice’s fault” in a larger sense: the source of the faulty behavior is Alice’s own character, and Alice can legitimately be blamed for her bad behavior; and this sense might be called blame fault. Consider John, whose own flawed character and bad behavior result in significant harm. John is at fault for the harm (the fault is in John himself), and John is a rational person (though like the rest of us, not perfectly rational) who makes his own—sometimes flawed—decisions. All this is common ground for the moral responsibility advocate and the moral responsibility abolitionist. But the former concludes that John therefore deserves blame and punishment for his rotten behavior, while the latter agrees that John is “at fault” for the mess (the fault does indeed lie within John), and John is a rational person who makes his own bad decisions, but John is not morally responsible and does not deserve punishment for his own faulty behavior (because ultimately John was shaped by a genetic and environmental history not of his own making or choosing). In both cases, John is at fault: he is reckless, shallow, and short-sighted. And the faults are John’s own. But there is a further question of whether John justly deserves condemnation and punishment for his flawed character and bad behavior; that is, whether John has blame fault in addition to his character fault.

The first point to note is that there clearly is a distinction to draw between these cases. John makes a mess of things because he is lazy and incompetent and lacking in self-discipline and deliberative fortitude. The mess was certainly John’s (character) fault: it resulted from flaws that are John’s own, and John is not so flawed—either temporarily or permanently—as to be excluded from membership in P.F. Strawson’s moral community of persons (John can be loved or hated, we can reason with him, and we may have a wide rich range of reactive attitudes toward

---

John). But there is an important difference between classifying John as deserving blame for his faults, and on the other hand regarding him as faulty but not blame-deserving.

An example may help mark this distinction. John has a deep-rooted gender prejudice—a profound character flaw that he recognizes and perhaps even accepts. "Probably women are equal in ability to men," John thinks to himself, "and it's wrong and unjustified to discriminate against women. I know that I'm neither morally nor rationally perfect; but I like the way I am, and I don't want to change." John's discriminatory behavior stems from his own character flaw, and the fault is John's own. John discriminates by purpose, not accident; and while flawed, he is not a maniac or sociopath who must be "permanently excused" and ostracized from the moral community. One might call John a "willing sexist," comparable in commitment and authenticity to Frankfurt's "willing addict."  

But the question of whether John should be blamed for his own character flaws (and the bad behavior stemming from them) is a different question altogether. It is perfectly meaningful to say: John is competent, and he has deep character flaws that are his own; he does not, however, deserve blame for either the flaws or the behavior. (Because, for example, John is the product of a sexist culture that shaped him to be profoundly sexist. All his friends are sexist, and he fears that if he changed he would lose his friends and perhaps a vital part of his own identity: overcoming sexism would involve a fearful fragmenting of his personality. Though John internalized his sexism from his culture, that does not make it any less his own; but recognizing those cultural forces may raise doubts concerning the degree to which John deserves blame for his flaws: "John had the bad fortune to be reared in a profoundly sexist culture; he is a vile sexist, but you can't really blame him for it.") The issue is not whether that is a good reason for denying that John deserves blame for his bad character and bad acts; the point is that the distinction it employs is genuine. If we can argue about whether morally flawed John deserves blame for his own moral faults, then the distinction between character fault and blame fault is established. Since we can meaningfully argue about whether crimson sunsets are beautiful, "beautiful" must have a meaning that is distinct from "crimson sunset"; and that will remain the case, even if the class designated by crimson sunsets and the class designated by things of beauty are exactly coextensive.

Harry Frankfurt's discussion of the willing addict draws a clear picture of what it means for a character trait to be deeply our own. The

---

11 Ibid.
addict who seeks drugs, but hates his addiction, is indeed an addict; but he is an unwilling addict, who prefers to be free of his enslavement to drugs. In contrast, the addict who approves of his addiction—while he cannot do otherwise than seek drugs—is acting from his own deep preferences, and is not coerced. But because Frankfurt fails to distinguish between a characteristic of one’s own and a characteristic for which one is morally responsible, Frankfurt draws an erroneous conclusion from this insightful analysis:

To the extent that a person identifies himself with the springs of his actions, he takes responsibility for those actions and acquires moral responsibility for them; moreover, the question of how the actions and his identifications with their springs are caused is irrelevant to the question of whether he performs the actions freely or is morally responsible for them.\(^\text{12}\)

If John “identifies himself with” his sexism, and “takes responsibility” for his own sexist behavior, then that character flaw and the behavior that it generates are John’s own; but moving to the claim that John is also “morally responsible” is no easy step. Frankfurt supposes there is no gap to bridge because he fails to distinguish between a characteristic being deeply one’s own and one being morally responsible for that characteristic.

To differentiate between being profoundly at fault and being to blame for one’s own fault, consider the case of David, who is captured and sold into slavery. He struggles against his enslavement, seeks to escape, hates being enslaved: he is, in short, a very unwilling slave. All of David’s escape attempts are in vain, and he is severely punished for his efforts. Eventually David learns that there is no escape, and that his efforts to throw off his shackles are futile. As year follows brutal year, David loses all hope. He begins to accept his enslavement (his years of struggle have gained him nothing except harsher treatment), and ultimately acquiesces in his enslavement. David now identifies himself as a slave, approves of his status, and loses all desire for freedom. David has become a “happy slave,” a willing slave whose deepest desire is to serve his master. This cruel process has left David profoundly enslaved, and the fault of passive preference for enslavement is now David’s own deep fault. But it is something very different to suggest that David deserves blame for his own deeply flawed preference for enslavement. David is profoundly enslaved, and his enslavement has been deeply internalized; but to suppose that he is to blame for his deep acquiescence is another claim altogether. A happy slave is more deeply enslaved, but he does not thereby

gain moral responsibility for his enslavement. He is deeply flawed, but not to blame. (Some may still conclude that when David becomes a willing slave he is morally responsible; but so long as they admit that such a conclusion is a step beyond the conclusion that David is a willing slave, the distinction in question is acknowledged.)

Maybe David—the “willing slave”—really is morally responsible. That seems utterly implausible to me, but some may find higher-order reflective approval sufficient for moral responsibility, even if the higher-order willing results from the brutal process that shaped David. I believe—along with most libertarians—that to be genuinely morally responsible, one must have a special ultimate responsibility (though contrary to libertarians, I deny that we can have such ultimate responsibility). Perhaps the libertarians and I are wrong. But this paper is not an argument against moral responsibility; rather, it argues only that one can consistently deny moral responsibility and sincerely apologize. If I’m wrong about the grounds for denial of moral responsibility, that does not undercut the claim that denial of moral responsibility is consistent with sincere apology. In similar fashion, suppose I believe that evolutionary biology gives conclusive grounds for believing that humans evolved from a common apelike ancestor, and I claim that such a belief is consistent with belief in God. If you reject evolutionary biology, that will not affect the claim that my belief in human evolution is consistent with my belief in God.

Belief in moral responsibility is close to universal, both within and without the philosophical forum. Thus we tend to go from “it was my fault” to “I am morally responsible for the wrong” as a matter of course. Where moral responsibility is the default position, a wrong that proceeds from my purposeful behavior and is acknowledged as my own seems automatically one for which I am morally responsible. But the question here is not what follows, given a context of moral responsibility. Rather, the question is: can those who deny moral responsibility count themselves and others as morally flawed, and can such moral responsibility abolitionists sincerely apologize for wrongdoing? What seems “natural to say” given the assumption of moral responsibility will be of little help in answering those questions.

Remorse Without Moral Responsibility

Confusing “being at fault” with “deserving blame for his own fault” is a common mistake. Robert Nozick, for example, says: “I see blaming him for something merely as attributing that to the exercise of a character
defect of his.”

But it is one thing to act out of one’s own character flaw, and another to deserve blame for such actions. So when we say “John is at fault,” or “It is John’s fault,” the statement is ambiguous. It may mean that John is the source of the bad act, and the act stems from his own character, and John is morally responsible for the act: John has blame fault; or it may mean that the act is John’s, and it comes from John’s own character faults, but with no implications concerning John’s moral responsibility for the act: it is John’s own character fault. That distinction is essential in examining another requirement for sincere apology: genuine remorse, or “self-reproach.” For genuine apology, I must acknowledge that I have violated a moral principle that is my own, and that we share. It would make no sense for me (a WASP) to apologize to you because you are offended by the presence of my African-American friends; I might well regret that you are offended, but I can’t apologize because I do not share your racist values, and I do not believe I have done anything wrong. But Alice—in betraying her friend’s confidence—certainly does believe that she did something wrong, and she might well feel regret at her acknowledged moral transgression and disgust at the character flaw revealed. It is very disturbing to discover that one’s character has deep flaws. Imagine you are called before the House UnAmerican Affairs Committee, and under intensive authoritarian pressure you “name names” of your friends. After leaving the hearings, you recognize your vile behavior and the character flaw behind it. This would be a profoundly disturbing revelation, and a source of deep regret, even self-disgust; and would be so even if you firmly believed that you were not morally responsible for the character flaw or the resulting behavior: “I realize that I’m not morally responsible for this flaw in my character; after all, I can see the powerful environmental forces that shaped me to be weak and acquiescent when confronted by figures of authority. But I am very sad to recognize this deep moral failing in my own character.” Alice—as a moral responsibility abolitionist—will not blame herself for her bad character; and if “self-reproach” is synonymous with “self-blame,” then Alice will not self-reproach/self-blame. But Alice might feel profound and sincere regret at the character and behavior she acknowledges as her own, and that seems quite sufficient to satisfy this condition for sincere apology. Alice might well say to herself, with genuine regret at this painful self-acknowledgment: “Alice, you are weak, you are not worthy of trust, you casually betray your best friend’s confi-

---

15This example is from Smith, “The Categorical Apology,” pp. 480-81.
dence; you have some serious moral problems, and you need to see what you can do to reform that part of your moral character.” But such sincere acknowledgment of moral fault does not imply that she believes herself to be morally responsible for her flawed character. (Alice desires to reform; but she does not count herself morally responsible for that virtuous desire, nor for her success or failure in achieving reform.)

Of course Alice might instead seek an excuse for her behavior, an option open equally to those who affirm and those who deny moral responsibility. Alice might insist that the fault lies not in her weak character, but instead in some other quarter: Alice was tricked into betraying her friend’s confidence; or she was coerced, or drugged, or demon-possessed. In offering such excuses, Alice is claiming that the fault is not really her own, the event did not flow from her own flawed character but from some external force. If Alice was forcefully administered a powerful drug that led to the delusional belief that she was talking to Barbara (rather than to Carl), then Alice is excused: her betrayal of Barbara’s secret is not the result of Alice’s own character flaw. But if instead Alice acknowledges that she wronged Barbara due to Alice’s own weak character, that is not an excuse. An excuse claims a special exception: the act was not really my own, it did not come from me. But for Alice, the sad truth is that the act did come from her own flawed character. If Alice had revealed Barbara’s secret under the coercive influence of drugs, Alice would have regretted that Barbara’s secret was revealed; but that would be a very different order of regret from the regret she feels when she realizes that she has betrayed Barbara’s secret due to her own deep shortcomings. Of course Alice (as a moral responsibility abolitionist) does not believe that she is morally responsible for her character weaknesses or strengths. But that is not because she believes she meets a special excusing condition; rather, it is because she believes that no one—under any circumstances whatsoever—is morally responsible: that no coherent case can be made for moral responsibility.

Alice—as a moral responsibility abolitionist—acknowledges her own character fault, but denies blame fault. Perhaps she is mistaken in her denial, but her position is not incoherent: there is no conceptual inconsistency in acknowledging character fault while rejecting blame fault. Thus Alice’s denial of blame-fault is no impediment to her sincere apology for an act that she acknowledges as her own act from her own character. Even if Alice is wrong in thinking that she is not morally responsible, there is nothing in her denial of moral responsibility that undercuts sincere apology. Alice can consistently believe that she is not—that she is

16As argued in Bruce N. Waller, “Denying Responsibility Without Making Excuses,”
never—morally responsible while offering a sincere apology for her character faults and the bad acts they produce.

Incidentally, one other commonly assumed element of sincere apology is open to question: the assumption that sincere apology entails a commitment to reform. True enough, if Alice apologizes for betraying her friend’s confidence, but appears to make no effort at changing this morally flawed behavior, we might well have some doubts about the sincerity of her apology. In most cases, sincere apology will be accompanied by a sincere effort to reform. But suppose Alice believes that this is an ineradicable element of her character, and she is incapable of reform. (This might be analogous to the situation of Frankfurt’s unwilling addict.) In that case—where Alice is completely convinced (even if mistakenly) that all her reform efforts are utterly useless—Alice may be unable to make an effort at reform; just as you are incapable of genuinely making an effort to flap your arms and fly. In such a case, Alice might make a sincere and heartfelt apology for bad acts stemming from a character flaw she genuinely regrets, but which she makes no effort to reform. But this is a special case, and not directly relevant to the question of whether moral responsibility is necessary for sincere apology; and in what follows I shall assume that reform efforts are a common element of sincere apology.

Apology and Responsibility

Even if one accepts that the moral responsibility abolitionist Alice could consistently believe that she has done wrong, as a moral responsibility abolitionist Alice does not believe that she is morally responsible for her misdeed; so how could it make sense for Alice to apologize for her wrongful act? How can she apologize if she does not believe she is responsible? Almost everyone who examines apology treats accepting responsibility as an essential and obvious condition of sincere apology. Thus Martin Golding speaks of apology as a case of making moral amends, requiring that we express moral regret in acknowledgment of our responsibility for doing wrong. Louis F. Kort regards accepting responsibility as a central condition for sincere apology. Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd state: "To apologize for an action is to admit that one did it, that it was wrong and harmful to the victim, and that one was responsible for doing it." Kathleen Gill regards "an acknowledgment of responsi-

19 Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, "The Promise and Pitfalls of Apology,"
bility for the act” as one of five essential elements for an apology.20

In the standard cases of apology it seems obvious that accepting responsibility for the wrongful act is an essential element of sincere apology. I can’t sincerely apologize if I was not responsible (or more precisely, if I do not believe that I was responsible), because without responsibility there is nothing to apologize for. I’m sorry that Joe treated you badly; but unless I was somehow in control of Joe, or conspired with Joe to do you harm, I can’t apologize for the wrong Joe did to you, though I may certainly regret that you were wronged. I can’t apologize, because I wasn’t responsible. So it appears that even if blame fault is not essential for sincere apology, the moral responsibility abolitionist is still barred from the most obvious and basic requirement for sincere apology: the acknowledgment of responsibility.

Acknowledging responsibility is an essential condition for sincere apology, but the requisite responsibility is not the moral responsibility denied by moral responsibility abolitionists. There are at least three distinct types of responsibility. We have long realized that being causally responsible is very different from being morally responsible: I might cause something to happen, though quite obviously not deserve blame or punishment. Having no medical history of such problems, I suffer a sudden seizure that results in my jerking my car into an oncoming vehicle; in that case, I am causally responsible for the other driver’s injury, but clearly not morally responsible.

The distinction between moral responsibility and causal responsibility is widely recognized; but the distinction between moral responsibility and taken responsibility is easily overlooked.21 Suppose a group of friends have made plans for an evening at the theater, looking forward to seeing a popular play. They arrive at the theater and discover that no one has reserved seats for their party, and several of the group are very disappointed. If Bryan offers an apology for the failure to secure tickets, his friends may well respond: “No, you shouldn’t apologize; it wasn’t your responsibility to get the tickets.” If that in fact is the case, then Bryan’s apology for failing to secure the tickets would make no sense. Suppose, however, that it was his responsibility to get the tickets: Bryan had invited everyone for an evening at the theater, and so there was a natural assumption that he would get the tickets; or, in this theater group, it is

---

always Bryan’s responsibility to get the tickets (Jill selects a show, Elizabeth arranges transportation, Arthur makes dinner reservations, and Bryan reserves the theater tickets); or, Bryan has explicitly taken responsibility by volunteering to get the tickets. In those cases, Bryan does indeed have responsibility for getting the tickets, and he might sincerely apologize to the others for his failure to secure them. But this sense of responsibility—the taken responsibility one has for carrying out a role or office or project—is very different from moral responsibility. If Bryan knowingly and voluntarily agreed to get the tickets, then he has the taken responsibility for getting tickets; but recognizing his taken responsibility is quite consistent with denying that he has moral responsibility—deserves blame or censure—for failing to perform the task. “Yes, he took responsibility for the tickets,” someone might say; “but we shouldn’t blame him for failing to get them, because he is profoundly forgetful, and he can’t help that”; or “he’s been under lots of stress, so we shouldn’t blame him”; or even “I don’t know why he failed to get the tickets; but I’m confident that there was some natural causal sequence that was not ultimately under his control, and so he doesn’t deserve blame.” Or from the other direction, suppose Bryan claims the right to praise for successfully carrying out the task: “Three cheers for me! I did a great job getting the tickets.” Someone challenges his claim of just deserts (you don’t deserve praise, because even though you did a great job, you were just lucky to be born with the ticket-securing gene, and so you deserve no special credit; or, you don’t deserve a special reward, because one of your friends actually did all the hard work tracking down the tickets; or, you don’t deserve special credit, because your brother owns the theater, so it’s easy for you to get tickets). In responding to such challenges, it is no good for Bryan to insist that he took responsibility for securing the tickets, that it was his taken responsibility. Everyone agrees that he had taken responsibility; the question is whether he also had moral responsibility, and that is a separate and distinct question.

Bryan can have clear taken responsibility when there is doubt concerning his moral responsibility; and evidence of taken responsibility will not settle the question of moral responsibility. The point is this: whatever one thinks of such reasons for denying moral responsibility, it is clear that moral responsibility is distinct from taken responsibility. Even if one concluded (implausibly) that taken responsibility is a sufficient condition for moral responsibility, it would still require further grounds for making that assertion; and the distinction between moral responsibility and taken responsibility would remain. In sum, taken responsibility is very important to us: the belief that we can make effective...
decisions and exercise control is psychologically healthy, and even when we recognize that perhaps someone else could run our lives better than we can we prefer to take responsibility for ourselves and our projects. Often we really do take and exercise control: in writing a paper, planting a garden, planning a holiday excursion. But that we exercise such control (as opposed to being socially or physically or psychologically incapable of doing so), and exercise it well rather than poorly, is ultimately (from the perspective of the moral responsibility abolitionist) the result of our good fortune, and not something for which we are morally responsible. Psychologists tell us that effective exercise of control requires a strong sense of self-efficacy that is, a strong sense that we can effectively accomplish our goals through our own efforts. I have a strong sense of self-efficacy, and thus meet that essential condition for exercising control. But that I have a robust sense of self-efficacy is my good luck, and not something for which I am ultimately responsible (or so we moral responsibility abolitionists believe). Thus I do exercise effective control, and am delighted to do so; but I am not morally responsible for my effective and enjoyable exercise of control. This valuable taken responsibility is not moral responsibility.

There may be a case for claiming that taken responsibility and causal responsibility are essential for sincere apology; but the present claim is only that if responsibility is essential for sincere apology, the responsibility in question will be taken and/or causal responsibility rather than moral responsibility. So there is no reason to suppose that the moral responsibility abolitionist—who can quite happily claim all manner of taken and causal responsibility for her acts and offices and character—cannot sincerely apologize. Or perhaps it really is moral responsibility that is required for sincere apology. But establishing that claim will require substantial argument; and given the argument offered here for why taken responsibility will suffice for sincere apology, the burden of proof

---


23 The key initial research on self-efficacy was done by Albert Bandura, and is extensively documented in Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. Another good discussion of the importance of self-efficacy (by a major researcher in this area) is Wallston, “Psychological Control and its Impact in the Management of Rheumatological Disorders.” Discussion of the philosophical implications of self-efficacy research can be found in Waller, “Neglected Psychological Elements of Free Will.”
will rest on those who insist that there is a further requirement of moral responsibility.

Once more: the goal of this paper is not to establish the truth of moral responsibility abolitionism, nor is it to prove that all grounds for moral responsibility abolition are consistent with sincere apology (if one claims that there is no moral responsibility because no one is capable of acting purposefully, then that might well undercut sincere apology). Rather, the goal is to show that at least one version of moral responsibility abolitionism (the not-uncommon version claiming that moral responsibility requires a naturalistically impossible prime cause ultimate responsibility) is consistent with sincere apology.

**Sincere Apologies by Moral Responsibility Abolitionists**

When we eliminate the confusions between blame fault and character fault, and between moral responsibility and taken responsibility, there remains no reason to deny the sincere apology of moral responsibility abolitionists. I can take responsibility for a project, fail to discharge that taken obligation due to my own character fault, and not be morally responsible for the failure (and as a moral responsibility abolitionist, not believe myself to be morally responsible for the failure), and still make a sincere apology for the failure. Alice can honestly and sincerely say to Barbara: I am sorry that my own flaws resulted in a failure that caused you harm; I am sincerely sorry for my own character flaws and for their harmful effects on you. The harmful act was my own, and I am not a puppet nor a pawn: I make my own decisions, and I take responsibility for my own acts and character (I run my own life, no one “manages” me). I don’t believe that I or anyone else deserves blame for our acts or our characters, or for how well or ill we manage to take responsibility for ourselves and our behavior; but the act was my own, and it came from my own flawed character and choice, and I am sincerely sorry for what I did and deeply regretful of the bad character elements revealed by my act and my choice, and I will make sincere efforts to correct that problem.

Of course, as a practicing moral responsibility abolitionist, Alice will acknowledge that it is no good beating herself up: she doesn’t deserve to suffer for her misdeeds or her own character flaws; furthermore, she may recognize that such self-flagellation is not an effective means of improving her own character. But she can be genuinely sorry that her own character and acts caused Barbara harm, and sincerely sorry to discover such flaws in her own character. I fear that had I been recruited for Milgram’s
notorious obedience experiment, 24 I would have continued to “administer shocks” even when the supposed victim screamed for mercy; and even though no one was actually harmed by my behavior—no real shocks were administered—I would have genuinely regretted such an “obedience to authority” character flaw deep in myself. But recognizing the profound influence of the authoritarian culture and religion in which I grew up, I would not blame myself for such a character flaw, though I deeply regret it; and blaming myself for the character flaw would not be a positive step in reshaping my character, while instead paying careful attention to the factors that shaped my character might lead to discovering effective ways to change my flawed character. Had I participated in an experiment with genuine shocks, and caused harm to some other experimental subject, I would be sincerely sorry for the harm and for the character weakness that generated the harm. But nothing in that would require that I believe myself to be morally responsible for my character or my acts.

Benefits of Sincere Apology for Moral Responsibility Abolitionists

Sincere apology requires that I recognize I am at fault (though I need not believe that I am to blame for my genuine fault); and perhaps it requires that I have taken responsibility for the harmful act that stemmed from my own flaw (but not that I have moral responsibility). And sincere apology (at least in most cases) requires that one resolve not to continue doing such wrongs, and a desire to set the wrongs right (to the degree possible). All of this is possible for the moral responsibility abolitionist, and it is important to recognize the consistency of moral responsibility denial with sincere apology. Sincere apology has great moral importance, and if those who deny moral responsibility could not sincerely apologize, that would reveal a severe moral deficiency in moral responsibility abolitionists. First, sincere apology involves genuine acknowledgment of wrongful behavior and a resolve to reform. One lacking those capacities can hardly count as a moral being at all, and certainly would not count as a moral being who is capable of moral improvement. As Jennifer Roback Morse notes, “[i]f a person is not repentant, then we suspect that he is either justifying his offense, or indifferent to it.” 25 And neither attitude is likely to result in moral reform.


Second, if the moral responsibility abolitionist could not sincerely apologize, that could easily be taken to indicate extreme arrogance among moral responsibility abolitionists. If I go to great trouble to meet you for a luncheon engagement and you simply fail to show up, I want you to apologize. If in your haste you run through a door and flatten me, scattering my books and papers and scraping my knee, I want an apology. If I greet you with a cheery good morning and you tell me to go to hell, I want an apology. If you refuse to apologize, you “add insult to injury.” Why so? Because the clear implication is that I can be ignored, mistreated, harmed, and insulted—and it doesn’t matter. I want an apology, because I want you to acknowledge that I am a person whose welfare and feelings are important. Harms and insults to me are not insignificant, because I am not insignificant. As Govier and Verwoerd note, a sincere apology involves “acknowledgment of the human dignity and moral worth of victims.”

It is notoriously true that members of “higher classes” feel that it is beneath their dignity to apologize to the lower classes. A nobleman might feel some regret at harming a peasant, and might even make some payment to mitigate the peasant’s suffering; but the nobleman will not apologize to the peasant, because that would acknowledge the peasant’s right to be recognized as a person, as someone who matters. Thus if it is assumed that those who deny moral responsibility must reject sincere apology, that assumption perhaps accounts for some of the visceral disgust often directed at moral responsibility abolitionists. When I deny all moral responsibility, it is mistakenly assumed that I could never sincerely apologize to anyone. And if I can never sincerely apologize, that implies incredible arrogance: when I wrong you it doesn’t matter, I can harm you and not be sorry for it, you are beneath my consideration. When the compatibility of sincere apology with moral responsibility denial is recognized, and the denial of moral responsibility is not mistakenly linked with the contemptuous arrogance that refuses to apologize, then perhaps we moral responsibility abolitionists will be looked upon more kindly.

Practical Benefits of Denying Moral Responsibility and Promoting Apology

Moral responsibility abolitionists can take responsibility, though they deny moral responsibility; they can recognize they are at fault, though they deny they deserve blame for their faults; and they can recognize that

they committed moral wrongs, can profoundly regret their immoral behavior, can resolve to turn from their wicked ways, and can willingly strive to repair the wrongs they have done. At this point, a skeptic might object: Okay, you have made a space for sincere apology; but in doing so, you have also made room for moral responsibility. So many philosophical hairs have been split that there is no longer any content to the claim that the sincere apologizer is denying moral responsibility. If I acknowledge that I have done wrong, feel deep regret at the wrong I have committed, and feel a deep desire to correct the wrong and “put things right,” then in doing so I also acknowledge that I am morally responsible for my act. Your argument makes room for sincere apology, but only by embracing moral responsibility.

To answer this objection, it is necessary to show that there is still some important difference between making a genuine full apology (complete with acknowledgment of wrongdoing, resolve to reform, and efforts to set things right) and embracing moral responsibility. That difference between offering a sincere apology and accepting moral responsibility does remain, and it is a difference that makes an important practical difference. It makes a difference—indeed, a life or death difference—in the reform of medical practice: an important reform that requires compatibility between sincerely apologizing and rejecting all blame and moral responsibility.

There is currently well-justified concern about the high rate of medical error. In the United States, deaths due to medical error are estimated at between 40,000 and 100,000 annually. While there are many causes involved, a central element of the problem is that medical caregivers—and especially doctors—are assumed to have full responsibility (both taken and moral responsibility) for their individual treatment decisions and acts. Of course no one suggests that a doctor can control all medical outcomes: some diseases and injuries are beyond contemporary medicine’s healing powers. Furthermore, doctors don’t make all the decisions: patients have the right to make choices concerning their own medical treatment. But on the current model, doctors are responsible for making the most accurate possible diagnosis, recommending the optimum treatment, and carrying out the agreed-upon treatment process in the most effective manner. If mistakes are made, the doctor (or sometimes the nurse or medical technician) is morally responsible and deserves blame. A physician, Lucian L. Leape, makes very clear the unfortunate effects of this model:

Physicians are socialized in medical school and residency to strive for error-free practice. There is a powerful emphasis on perfection, both in diagnosis and treatment. In everyday hospital practice, the message is equally clear: mistakes are unacceptable. Physicians are expected to function without error, an expectation that physicians translated into the need
to be infallible. One result is that physicians, not unlike test pilots, come to view an error as a failure of character—you weren’t careful enough, you didn’t try hard enough. This kind of thinking lies behind a common reaction by physicians: “How can there be an error without negligence?”

... this need to be infallible creates a strong pressure to intellectual dishonesty, to cover up mistakes rather than to admit them. The organization of medical practice, particularly in the hospital, perpetuates these norms. Errors are rarely admitted or discussed among physicians in private practice. Physicians typically feel, not without reason, that admission of error will lead to censure or increased surveillance or, worse, that their colleagues will regard them as incompetent or careless. Far better to conceal a mistake or, if that is impossible, to try to shift the blame to another, even the patient.27

This model of individual moral responsibility has very unfortunate effects. First, when there are problems and mistakes, the focus is on the individual who made a mistake and deserves blame. Attention is deflected from the systemic problems that are the root cause of individual errors: inadequate training of physicians, confusing naming and abbreviation practices for medications, exhausting schedules, understaffing and resultant pressure, failure to employ available computerized diagnostic aids as a check on physician observations and memories, lack of scanning devices to double-check all medications, absence of multiple safeguard levels so that errors are detected before harm results, and so on. When the focus is narrowed to finding and blaming an individual, the systemic causes of individual errors are left in place to produce repeated failure. The second problem with the system of individual blame fits closely with the first, and exacerbates it. When blame is focused on the individual who was the last link in the chain that produced the mistake, then individuals who make errors are reluctant to admit their mistakes, striving instead to hide the problem.

A crucial step in reforming the system and reducing the error rate is eliminating the “blame culture”; that is, first we must stop blaming individuals for mistakes, and instead focus on what caused the mistake and how to correct it. The British National Health Service and the government of the United Kingdom recently recognized the importance of that step in a document designed to launch the development of a better medical system with fewer errors. A Commitment to Quality, a Quest for Excellence—a 2001 joint statement by the National Health Service and the UK government—pledges “to recognise that honest failure should not be responded to primarily by blame and retribution, but by learning and a drive to reduce risk for future patients.”28 A similar approach is recom-

mended by the 2000 Institute of Medicine report, entitled "To Err Is Human." In that study, the IOM rejects the traditional medical culture of "naming, shaming, and blaming," instead promoting examination of the larger systemic causes of mistakes to design a safer medical system. We know a great deal about how to fix systems that generate errors. The air traffic control system was plagued by mistakes: mistakes that led to tragic accidents and terrifying near-misses. So long as errors were regarded as the mistakes of an individual controller who would be singled out for blame, controllers struggled to keep their errors hidden; not surprisingly, the errors were repeated. When the focus was shifted to problems and flaws in the air traffic control system, controllers were no longer blamed for errors. Workers were instead encouraged to bring errors and potential sources of error into the light, where people could work together to correct the problem, procedures could be devised to prevent errors, and small errors could be fixed before becoming tragedies. If an individual controller could not function successfully—including cases when a once-competent controller wore down under the physical and emotional stress of a trying job—the individual could report the problem; and rather than being condemned as incompetent, the individual would be recognized as taking responsibility for air safety, treated as a valuable contributor to a safer system, and reassigned to a more appropriate position with no hint of blame. Rather than concealing their own problems and their own close calls and errors—or struggling to shift the blame—controllers worked cooperatively to find the source of problems and correct them. Rather than seeking nonexistent infallible air traffic controllers, and then blaming them when they made mistakes, reformers successfully found and corrected the problems in the system.

Blaming individuals and holding people morally responsible—air traffic controllers, doctors, or anyone else—is not an effective way of making either systems or people better; instead it is a design for hiding small problems until they grow into larger ones, and a design for concealing system shortcomings by blaming problems on individual failure. If we want to promote effective attention to the causes and correction of medical mistakes, and the development of more effective behavior and more reliable systems, then we must move away from the model of individual blame and instead encourage an open inquiry into mistakes and their causes, and into how a system can be devised to prevent such mistakes in medical practice.

Of course some mistakes do not indicate moral flaws in the physician. A smudge on an x-ray leads to a mistaken diagnosis, a hand slips in sur-

surgery: these are errors, and physicians may be profoundly troubled by them, but they don’t reveal moral faults in the physician’s character. Some mistakes, however, may well stem from serious character flaws: I was in a hurry to make my tee time, and I neglected to check as carefully as I should have done before performing the surgery; I was arrogant, and thought I could successfully perform the surgery without proper training. If the medical community is shaping some physicians to develop such hazardous arrogance, that is a dangerous systemic moral problem that should be acknowledged and corrected; but blame will impede such positive reform efforts.

Jeanne L. Steiner favors a model that combines the systems approach with insistence on moral responsibility for some faulty individual behavior (such as the behavior of those “who knowingly disregard safe practices or policies in high-risk situations”). From Steiner’s perspective, the “systems approach” is valuable in its focus on detecting the systematic causes of error, but it must be balanced with the understanding that “there may be situations in which personnel and/or legal sanctions are entirely warranted.” But there are serious disadvantages to adding an individual blame component. The systems approach has proved its worth in reducing mistakes and correcting problems; it seems more plausible to extend it further, rather than stopping short because of a commitment to an individual retributive moral responsibility model that is a well-established failure. One could adopt a limited systems approach, combined with individual moral responsibility at some limiting points, but the result seems likely to limit the effectiveness of the systems model. The question is not whether such a mixed system is possible, but rather: why would anyone wish to adopt it?

Steiner maintains that when practitioners “knowingly disregard safe practices or policies in high-risk situations” that is a clear example of when it is best to suspend the systems (non-blame) model and switch to the punitive perspective of moral responsibility. Unfortunately, Steiner’s type of case is all too common in medical practice: a physician fails to take proper precautions to avoid high-risk infection during surgery, or fails to follow guidelines in checking for potentially deadly conditions during an examination, or rushes to a diagnosis without considering all the relevant factors. When this happens, the physician has made a terrible mistake, which may have terrible consequences for patient care, and the fault can be traced to the flawed character of the physician who failed to

31 Ibid., p. 98.
take sufficient care and exercise proper concern. If we adopt the individual moral responsibility model, the physician is disciplined, and the problem is regarded as "solved": we have found and punished the morally responsible individual. But the problem continues to occur as other physicians make the same sort of mistake—and make every effort to hide their mistakes to avoid blame and punishment. Indeed, the medical community may work together to hide such mistakes, with physicians cooperating in the cover-up in the hope that their colleagues will return the favor when their own rushed mistakes occur.

Under a more thoroughgoing systems approach, physicians can openly acknowledge that they rushed (when they should have exercised greater caution), the extent and nature of the problem can be critically examined, the causes can be discovered (perhaps in understaffing, or in administrative pressure to increase speed and "efficiency," or inadequate medical school training; or perhaps, in the worst scenario, in the licensing of physicians who are so greedy that they rush patient care in order to maximize their own earnings). The individual physician who rushes through a treatment process and thus places the patient at greater risk is certainly a flawed physician, whatever the causes of that serious character flaw. But the best way of discovering and changing such flaws, and preventing their development in new physicians, is by adopting policies that make it easier to detect the flaw, understand its nature and causes, and implement programs for correcting it. A policy of individual moral responsibility blocks that process, while rejection of moral responsibility facilitates it.

So the first important movement in improving medical care eliminates the culture of individual blame. The second is encouraging medical personnel to apologize for mistakes. Patients, like everyone else, want apologies when they are wronged. In one of the few studies on the subject, almost 100% of patients surveyed wanted their physicians to acknowledge and apologize for all mistakes in their treatment, including minor errors. Even if medical personnel have a hard time dealing with their own fallibility, patients generally do not: they recognize that medical personnel are human, that humans have flaws, and that humans make mistakes. If patients are harmed without apology, then patients feel that they are being treated disrespectfully: as if their harms don't matter, as if the patients are so insignificant that it would be "beneath the doctor's dignity" to offer a sincere apology. While some fear that apologizing to patients would open a floodgate of malpractice litigation, practice shows that the opposite is the case: according to Rich Boothman, chief risk

---

officer at the University of Michigan Health System, when that institution adopted the policy of apologizing to patients for mistakes the litigation caseload was reduced by half and millions of dollars were saved.

Both of these programs—moving away from individual blame for mistakes, and promoting apologies for mistakes—appear to have great promise for improving medical care and patients' satisfaction with medical care; but they seem to pull in opposite directions. If we eliminate individual blame and moral responsibility for medical mistakes, then it might seem that no one can offer a sincere apology. But rather than working at cross purposes, the two movements are complementary. As we move away from a system of individual blame, people are more willing to acknowledge—and strive to correct—their mistakes; and acknowledging that I made a mistake is obviously the first and essential step toward making a sincere apology. When I acknowledge my mistake and apologize to you for the harm I did, I am not saying that I deserve blame; rather, I am saying that you deserve to be treated with decency, treated as a person who should not be harmed, regarded with concern and regret when something goes wrong, and respected as a person whose welfare matters and with whom we must deal honestly.

Openness about mistakes—which is encouraged by eliminating blame—is a natural partner to apology, since apology for unacknowledged mistakes is impossible. Furthermore, sincere apology normally must include a genuine desire to reform and to prevent recurrence of the wrong. If I am genuinely sorry that I did some act, or was involved in some wrong, then I must be honestly eager to avoid any recurrence of the act. “I'm sorry I cheated you and I can’t wait to do it again” is not a sincere apology. The best way of avoiding mistakes and harms in the future—the errors and mistakes that I am genuinely sorry for, and for which I sincerely apologize—is to focus on what caused the mistake, rather than focusing on “who is to blame.” Blaming the unfortunate individual in whom the flawed process reached its fulfillment fails to fix the deeper systemic causes and does nothing to prevent other persons from developing similar flaws and making the same mistakes.

Developments in contemporary medicine are perhaps the clearest example of the benefits of combining the denial of moral responsibility with the affirmation of sincere apology, but the restorative justice movement (particularly in juvenile justice and in special community courts for “first nation” Canadians and aboriginal New Zealanders) is also instruc-

---

tive. In contrast to the traditional retributive justice model, restorative justice focuses on restoring to wholeness or health the community where the crime occurred and the crime victims (so far as possible), as well as restoring the perpetrator to the community. Restorative justice programs vary widely, but there are some important common features. First, it is important that the person committing a crime—who harmed the community and individuals within the community—acknowledge the wrongdoing, recognize that others were hurt by the wrongdoing, recognize his or her own fault, and sincerely apologize for the wrong done. Second, the community emphasizes restoring the wrongdoer to the community, and examines what went wrong to cause this community member to become seriously flawed in his or her character, and what can be done to change the causal forces to correct such flaws and prevent their development in others. Thus, the restorative justice model combines a strong commitment to sincere apology with an equal commitment to finding and understanding and correcting the causes for flawed character (including causes within the community itself) and de-emphasis of punitive measures and individual moral responsibility. The success of such restorative programs in reducing recidivism (like the success of the systems-plus-apology approach in reducing medical error and increasing patient satisfaction) strengthens the case for sincere apology without moral responsibility.

Conclusion

Apologies are not intrinsic goods. When Barbara is wronged by Alice’s harmful act, then it is good that Alice sincerely apologize to Barbara. When a patient is harmed by a physician’s haste or negligence or error, it is good that the physician apologize to the patient. When a person is harmed by a young person’s theft or assault, it is good that the youth make an apology. It would be better if Alice, the physician, and the juvenile had not done the harmful deeds at all, and the best way of minimizing character flaws and preventing harms—and needing fewer apologies—is through a policy of abolishing moral responsibility. Though this

---

paper supports that conclusion, the purpose of this paper is not to argue for the benefits of moral responsibility abolition. What the paper does claim to establish, however, is that the goods and benefits of sincere apology are fully consistent with the denial of moral responsibility.

Turning away from individual blame does not undercut sincere apology for wrongs and mistakes; to the contrary, it lays an important foundation for sincere apology. Sincere apology requires that we honestly acknowledge that a mistake was made, and eliminating blame facilitates that open acknowledgment. Second, sincere apology implies that we do not want the mistake to be repeated, and abolishing the culture of blame is the best way to promote effective systemic and individual reform. Third, sincere apology requires that we strive to correct the error, so far as possible; and hiding mistakes (as the blame culture encourages) precludes effective measures to correct mistakes or reduce their harmful effects.

The medical community has learned that sincere apology waxes when the blame culture wanes, and that is a lesson all of us should take to heart. A world without moral responsibility is the optimum environment for sincere apology.  

Bruce N. Waller  
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies  
Youngstown State University  nwaller@ysu.edu

---

Thanks to the editors of this journal and two anonymous referees for excellent advice on improving the paper; and to many people—Chris Bache, Brendan Minogue, Mustansir Mir, Deborah Mower, Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez, Lia Ruttan, Tom Shipka, Linda Tessier, Mark Vopat, Adam Waller, Russell Waller, Victor Wan-Tatah, and Richard White—for very stimulating discussions and vigorous criticisms. I deserve no blame for the remaining errors, which are due to my incorrigible arrogance; but I sincerely apologize for them.
Copyright of Social Theory & Practice is the property of Florida State University / Dept. of Philosophy and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.