
Responsibility and the Self-Made Self

Author(s): Bruce N. Waller

Source: *Analysis*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Jan., 1993), pp. 45-51

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of The Analysis Committee

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3328725>

Accessed: 06-01-2019 00:51 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Analysis Committee, Oxford University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Analysis*

Responsibility and the Self-made Self

BRUCE N. WALLER

Responsibility has been sought in many places, from the mundane to the miraculous. But recently some philosophers have suggested a bold new basis for responsibility: we make it – and take it – ourselves. Not through miraculous self-choosing or contra-causal creativity, but by the ordinary process of shaping and approving our characters as we live our day-to-day this-worldly lives. We are not Prime Movers Unmoved, but we are genuine movers and shakers, who do things, choose things, make things – including our selves – and take responsibility for what we make.

This self-made-responsibility view is exhibited in Harry G. Frankfurt's claim that we take responsibility through identification:

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 questions of how the actions and his identifications with their springs are caused are irrelevant to the questions of whether he performs the actions freely or is morally responsible for performing them. ([2], p. 122)

Along similar lines, Daniel Dennett emphasizes taking responsibility through self-making:

I take responsibility for any thing I make and then inflict upon the general public... Common wisdom has it that much the same rationale grounds personal responsibility; I have created and unleashed an agent who is myself; if its acts produce harm, the manufacturer is held responsible. I think this common wisdom is indeed wisdom... ([1], p. 85)

These views have strong appeal: while avoiding mysticism and miracles, they emphasize the possibility and desirability of self-making and of taking responsibility for self. This places responsibility for myself exactly where I want it: in my hands, in my purposes and decisions and efforts, and in no one else's. I can decide for myself what is worthwhile and how to pursue and accomplish it, and such self-making and self-modifying exorcises the spectre of fatalistic futility. If my laziness frustrates me I am not a passive victim cursed with a fatal flaw: I can if I wish change my character, and make – or re-make – myself. In that sense I am responsible for myself, and glad to be so.

Unfortunately, champions of responsibility for self sometimes slide from those legitimate responsibility claims to claims concerning moral responsi-

ANALYSIS 53.1, January 1993, pp. 45–51. © Bruce N. Waller

bility. Frankfurt treats taking-responsibility-for-self as the very process by which moral responsibility is acquired: when ‘a person identifies himself with the springs of his actions, he takes responsibility for those actions and acquires moral responsibility for them’; and when Dennett considers a ‘thoroughly mean-spirited’ individual, he suggests that since ‘one can be as responsible for one’s character as for any other artifact arising from one’s past efforts’ therefore this despicable individual indeed may be one ‘who deserves to be despised’ ([1], p. 167). But in fact there are formidable obstacles along the path from responsibility-for self-making to moral (just-deserts) responsibility: obstacles – it will be argued – that make the path impassable.

I am responsible for my own life, I can make my own choices, I take responsibility for my self. These are high-sounding sentiments, but there is nothing mysterious or even esoteric about them. Such responsibility for self falls into the same category as most of the workaday responsibilities that we (as responsible individuals) exercise. I am responsible for preparing my courses, keeping the minutes of the budget committee, picking up my child from school. These are my responsibilities, and I shall be insulted at the suggestion that I am not responsible, or that I really do not have such responsibilities, or that I am incapable of handling such responsibilities. But however much I may value and claim and take such responsibilities, they do not imply moral responsibility.

When we look closely at my responsibility for my job, my children, my offices – and for my self – it is obvious that that responsibility is distinct and different from moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is fundamentally related to fairness, to justice, to just deserts: if I am morally responsible for the theft, then it is fair and just that I be punished for it; and I can be justly blamed and justly punished (or justly praised and justly rewarded) only when I am morally responsible. But the responsibilities discussed above – responsibility for an office, a job, a role, a task – fall under a different rubric. H. L. A. Hart ([3], p. 212) characterizes the responsibilities of offices and jobs as role-responsibility; to highlight the elements emphasized by Frankfurt and Dennett, it might be called take-charge-responsibility (TCR), and distinguished from moral or just-deserts-responsibility (JDR). TCR is important; indeed, its importance could hardly be overstated. But it is not grounds for moral responsibility: it is not JDR, and it provides no justification for ascriptions of JDR.

Consider my role as secretary for the budget committee. I take responsibility for the role, I acknowledge that responsibility, I have full take-charge-responsibility. But that TCR does not imply just-deserts-responsibility. For it is perfectly consistent and understandable to say: Bruce is responsible – fully responsible – for keeping the records of the committee;

but he should not be blamed for failing at it (because his senility or psychoses or family difficulties make it impossible for him to effectively carry out his duties). So one may have full TCR, while having no JDR; one may be role-responsible, but not be morally responsible for the manner in which one discharges that role. Thus TCR and JDR are distinct and different species.

The same point can be seen from the other direction. I may have full TCR for the role of secretary, but have no JDR for carrying out the tasks splendidly. I have an excellent assistant who does all the work (so I deserve no credit), or I am doing a task far below my capacities in order to shirk tasks better suited to my outstanding abilities, or my superb secretarial abilities are merely the lucky result of my genetics (I am blessed with the committee secretary gene) and I have done nothing to enhance or strengthen or sustain that God-given gift. So again, I may be fully TCR while deserving no praise, while being devoid of JDR.

The TCR/JDR distinction is also seen by looking at the ways in which one can actually take responsibility. I can certainly take responsibility – take-charge-responsibility – for the role of committee secretary (I can volunteer for the job, or just take on the task when no one else does it); but I cannot simply take responsibility (JDR) when praise and blame and just deserts are at stake. If someone questions whether I deserve praise for splendidly carrying out the role of committee secretary ('Bruce deserves no credit; his assistant did all the work'; or 'Bruce deserves no praise; he was just lucky enough to have the right genes for the job') I cannot dismiss such questions by taking responsibility. Nor can I take responsibility for failing to do the task, when the question is whether I am JDR for the failure (because of my psychosis). My wish to take moral responsibility for my failure may be touching, but it will carry no weight in actually establishing JDR.

Nothing changes when the role-responsibility – the take-charge-responsibility – is for my self: it is TCR, and TCR for one's own self is supremely important; but the importance of TCR for self does not transform it into moral (just-deserts) responsibility. Certainly it is my responsibility to consider the values I hold and the sort of person I am and wish to be. I may seek advice and consider criticisms, but I have responsibility for my self and my values and I – not my parents, my party, nor my therapist – will make the decisions. And if I am denied that responsibility – if someone else has take-charge-responsibility for my self – then I suffer important and demeaning and even depersonifying ([4], p. 299) loss. But brief examination of how self-making skills develop shows that my strong take-charge-responsibility for my self does not imply just-deserts-responsibility.

There are important skills for effective self-making: one requires powers of reflection, strength to examine one's actual motives, knowledge and imagination to discover the existence and implications and effects of vari-

ous possibilities, fortitude to pursue goals and break self-destructive habits. Reflecting on these essential self-making skills casts doubt on just-deserts-responsibility for self-making, for there is no reason to believe that one is any more morally responsible for self-making skills than for cabinet-making or candle-making or committee-secretary skills. We know a great deal about how one develops skills of imagination, self-knowledge, fortitude – and how one fails to develop them. Early experience of progressively more demanding tasks – that can be successfully accomplished by gradually increasing effort – nurtures fortitude. The experience of impossibly difficult tasks – with consequent failed efforts – engenders lethargy. The child whose imaginative quests are supported with delight and encouragement and reassurance learns to explore options and keep an open mind; the child whose explorations are punished, or stifled by subtle parental threats of affection withdrawal, develops a stunted capacity for the vital self-making skills of open exploration. One might quibble about the details of the above psychological accounts, but the point is simply that when the sources of self-making (role-responsibility-taking) skills are soberly examined, it is obvious that the energetic (or lethargic) and imaginative (or dull) individual is not morally responsible for those essential skills, nor for the levels of such skills. Of course one may take responsibility – take-charge-responsibility – for developing a self with better self-development skills; but whether one has the skills to take and effectively exercise take-charge-responsibility for strengthening self-development skills will not be something for which one is just-deserts responsible. And to assert – what is true – that the individual may nonetheless have full role (take-charge) responsibility for evaluating and improving such self-making skills merely makes one more turn around the loop: it does not establish just-deserts-responsibility.

When the take-responsibility-for-self arguments of Frankfurt and Dennett are reinterpreted as arguments for TCR (rather than JDR), the weakest points of their arguments are transformed into strengths. Consider Dennett's claim that we all end up roughly equal in our capacities for responsibility:

... moral development is not a race at all, with a single winner and everyone else ranked behind, but a process that apparently brings people sooner or later to a sort of plateau of development... But everyone comes out more or less in the same league. When people are deemed "good enough" their moral education is over, and except for those who are singled out as defective – retarded or psychopathic, for instance – the citizenry is held to be composed of individuals of roughly equivalent talents, insofar as the demands of citizenship are concerned. Both initial differences and variations in subsequent luck are commonly held to average out. ([1], p. 96)

If this is an argument for moral responsibility (just deserts) based on rough equivalence in skills and capacities, then the flaws in the argument are painfully obvious. When we consider capacities for avoiding bad conduct, it is clear that not everyone has ‘roughly equivalent talents’; and that is even more obvious when the focus is on capacities for positive achievement. Even excluding the ‘retarded or psychopathic’, we remain vastly different in intelligence, education, fortitude, imagination, inquisitiveness, sympathy; and ‘initial differences and variations in subsequent luck’ do not ‘average out’, but instead are more likely to have cumulative effects. We are not equal in opportunities and capacities, and moral responsibility judgements based on the assumption that we are roughly equal are both unfair and implausible.

But if Dennett’s ‘plateau of development’ is instead the minimum competency required to exercise take-charge-responsibility for self (not to establish just-deserts-responsibility), then it becomes both plausible and humane. Freedom is maximized by treating everyone – except the severely defective – as occupying the same take-charge-responsibility-for-self plateau. Whether one is a master craftsman or a minimally competent bungler at self-making, one may legitimately claim and take and exercise a full measure of take-charge-responsibility for self. I am not as skilled at self-making as is my friend Joyce (she has greater intelligence, imagination and perseverance) but I insist – rightly and reasonably – on taking and exercising equal take-charge-responsibility for my self, and on full rights to mould my self as I see fit. But it is something quite different to suggest that because I have minimum level self-making capacity (which justifies full take-charge-responsibility for my self), I therefore have equal (or any) just-deserts-responsibility for doing well or ill at exercising my equal take-charge-responsibility for my self. The same point applies to Frankfurt’s brusque dismissal of causal history:

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 questions of how the actions and his identifications with their springs are caused are irrelevant to the questions of whether he performs the actions freely or is morally responsible for performing them. ([2], p. 122)

If the issue is moral responsibility and just deserts then dismissal of causal history is unjustified. Suppose that Scrooge’s deprived and brutal childhood shaped his profound fear of vulnerability and rejection, and causes him to approve and identify with his avarice. It is more callous than plausible to suggest that Scrooge’s unfortunate history has no bearing on his moral responsibility for his commitment to greed. But if the question is

instead whether one should be able to fully take-responsibility-for-self and pursue the goals one does favour – whatever their causal origins, and whatever the developmental history of one’s (strong or barely minimal) self-making capacities – that is another matter. Scrooge’s causal history results in unfortunate goals and choices and commitments, and acquaintance with that history casts doubt on his moral responsibility for being such a poor practitioner of self-making; but so long as he somehow developed minimally adequate self-making capacities, then (assuming we value freedom above compulsory moral perfectionism) his unfortunate history cannot justify denying Scrooge’s full rights to take-charge-responsibility for shaping and living his life as he chooses.

This last point is of the first importance. Denial of moral responsibility is often treated as equivalent to the denial of all individual rights and responsibilities, and thus is thought to open the door to the most brutal and repressive methods of shaping character and controlling behaviour. When it is recognized that what is denied is moral responsibility and not take-charge-responsibility (not role-responsibility, and certainly not role-responsibility-for-self), it is clear that denial of moral responsibility is not a threat to individual rights. We want the right to follow our own paths, to engage in our own self-making; and that is fully protected by respect for take-charge-responsibility-for-self. So denial of spurious just-deserts-responsibility does not threaten the genuinely valuable take-charge-responsibility, nor the individual rights (such as rights to noninterference) it supports; to the contrary, clear focus on take-charge-responsibility skills (without the fog of moral responsibility) should offer new opportunities to nurture and enhance autonomous self-making capacities. In sum, the take-responsibility arguments of Frankfurt and Dennett are better construed as cogent arguments for take-charge-responsibility, rather than as implausible arguments for just-deserts-responsibility; and when that distinction is recognized, we may conclude that take-charge-responsibility (rather than just-deserts-responsibility) is what we really wanted all along.¹

*Youngstown State University
Youngstown, OH 44555, U.S.A.*

References

- ¹ Thanks to Edmund Abegg, Chris Bache, Peter Baldino, Stan Browne, Dana Bushnell, James Dale, Stephanie Dost-Barnhizer, Richard Double, George Graham, Brendan Minogue, James Munro, Charles Reid, George Schlesinger, Karen Seubert, Tom Shipka, J.-C. Smith, and Larry Udell for helpful discussions.

- [1] Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).
 [2] Harry G. Frankfurt, 'Three Concepts of Free Action', *Aristotelian Society Proceedings Supplementary Volume 49* (1975) 113–25.
 [3] H. L. A. Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).
 [4] Charles Taylor, 'Responsibility for Self', in *The Identities of Persons*, edited by A. O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 281–99.

Obligation, Responsibility and Alternate Possibilities

MICHAEL J. ZIMMERMAN

Harry Frankfurt is well-known for his argument, in [1], against the Principle of Alternate Possibilities:

(PAP) A person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.

In [2], pp. 95–96, he argues that the rejection of (PAP) does not require rejection of the Kantian principle that 'ought' implies 'can':

(K) An agent S has a moral obligation to perform [not to perform] an act A only if it is within S's power to perform [not to perform] A.

('It is within S's power to perform A' is here to be understood to mean the same as 'S is free to do A'.) In [3], David Widerker argues that Frankfurt is mistaken, since (K) entails (PAP), or at least that part of (PAP) that deals with moral blame:

(PAP2) S is morally blameworthy for performing [not performing] A only if it is within S's power not to perform [to perform] A.

Widerker's argument is simple. He claims that (PAP2) follows from (K), given the following proposition, which he claims to be a necessary truth:

(B2) S is morally blameworthy for performing [not performing] A only if S has a moral obligation not to perform [to perform] A.

Of course, (PAP2) does follow from (K) conjoined with (B2). But (B2),