Foreword

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At the occasion of its 20th anniversary, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* organised a conference on the theme ‘Dimensions of Responsibility’ that took place in Pavia, Italy on June 8 and 9, 2017. This special issue, edited by Associate Editors Emanuela Ceva and Lubomira Radoilska, contains the keynote lectures, a selection of papers presented during the conference and an article by the issue’s Editors. The Associate Editors asked us who stepped down as Editors-in-Chief during the conference, to write a foreword for this special issue, a request that we accepted with pleasure.

Responsibility is not just a topic within ethics, it is a central topic. It appears in almost every debate on contemporary moral problems, which is why it deserves serious attention in theoretical ethics. This foreword is not the place to contribute to the theoretical reflection on responsibility, we confine ourselves to making a few remarks on the growing importance of responsibility, on the limits of individual responsibility and on its relation to collective responsibility.

Responsibility is fundamental to any ethical theory or system of ethics: it is intimately linked to the object of ethics, human action. It is widely agreed upon that there are several concepts of responsibility. Here we distinguish between (backward-looking) outcome responsibility as accountability, (forward-looking) role-related and role-transcending responsibility, and the capacity of responsibility. These concepts have in common that they regard action as different from mere behaviour in that it is intentional and deliberate. Action is not determined by impulses or external causes, but results from choice. Responsibility has become more important in the previous centuries while the freedom to act in according to one’s own choices expanded. Two developments underlie the growing freedom to make one’s own choices. The first development is theological-metaphysical. It consists of a change in the view of the nature of morality and of moral agency, nicely described by Jerome Schneewind as the replacement of the old conception of morality as obedience to God by that of morality as self-governance

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(Schneewind 1998). The conception of morality as obedience did, according to many philosophers in the 17th and eighteenth century, not allow for a proper appreciation of human dignity. The idea of morality as self-governance was already present in the seventeenth century, but became articulated in the moral philosophies of Reid, Bentham, and Kant. Man was no longer seen as the passive follower of God's commands, but became an active being who was capable to govern his life and actions in accordance with self-chosen principles and ideals. He cannot govern his life without taking (forward-looking) responsibility for what has to be done and being accountable (accepting backward-looking responsibility) for the choices he made and the actions he undertook. The self-governing man is no longer, or not exclusively, accountable to God, but primarily to the inner forum of his conscience and to his fellow-men. The second development underlying the growing freedom to make one's own choices is the political translation of the conception of moral autonomy into individual rights. It becomes the task of the government to protect and promote the external freedom that is necessary for moral autonomy. This view on the relation between government and citizens is found in the philosophies of many thinkers such as Hobbes, Kant, and Mill. The secularisation of morality resulting in an autonomous morality, went along with a process of liberalisation of society both of which placed the individual and individual responsibility centre-stage.

Especially in the last two centuries responsibility has become more important. The situations in which choices have to be made between alternative options - goods, services, policies increased substantially. We are now (prospectively) responsible for many things, both in our private life, in our social roles, and in our public life. As private persons we are responsible for having or not having children, for choosing the schools for our children, for our behaviour as road users, for the separation of our waste and the level of our energy consumption. We also have many responsibilities in our jobs, in our neighbourhoods, and as citizens. Moreover, the choices that have to be made are often complex, while the consequences are far-reaching. In all these roles we are held responsible (accountable) for failures and bad choices.

There is a growing insight and awareness that choices and actions always have both positive and negative, foreseeable, unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences. Awareness also that many choices have an uncertain outcome, with only chances of benefits and many risks. The consequences of choices are no longer limited to our time and place, but reach out far into the future and far outside the place we live. We are also supposed to base our choices and decisions on perhaps not all available knowledge, but at least on all publicly accessible knowledge about their possible short-term and long-term, local and global consequences. Our responsibility seems to have no limits in time and place. Many decisions and actions take place in pre-given institutional contexts. One's behaviour as a road user is heavily influenced by the quality of one's vehicle and the quality of the roads. Many actions are part of large, supra-individual enterprises, as, for example, building a tunnel, or of the policies of large multinational organisations.

It is no surprise that much of the philosophical discussions about responsibility concern responsibility for future generations, global responsibility, the limits of both our forward-looking and backward-looking responsibility, and the relation between individual and collective responsibility. All these issues are present in the debate on climate change. We do not intend to contribute to the debate on climate change, we only use it to illustrate issues concerning responsibility.

Climate change has in the main been caused by human thirst for energy, the burning of fossil fuels and the resulting emissions of greenhouse gases, especially CO₂ which stays in the air for centuries. The progressive warming of the atmosphere is causing severe problems,

already for present generations, but above all for people in the future. Although climate change is a global phenomenon, its consequences become visible locally and regionally. Parts of our planet are in danger of becoming uninhabitable because of, for example, the rising levels of the oceans and desertification. Not everyone and every country is, or will be, equally affected by the effects of climate change. However, addressing the problems caused by climate change requires a world-wide energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources. The costs of this transition will be huge. Developing countries claim less responsibility because the present generation of their inhabitants suffer from the consequences of climate change, caused by the present and the previous generations of developed countries. According to them, developed countries benefitted most and still benefit from large-scale use of energy and from polluting production processes. Moreover, the former colonial powers among them owe their present welfare largely to the exploitation of their former colonies. Therefore they have, according to developing countries, a double duty to pay for the larger part of the costs of energy transition.

Are they right? Citizens of former colonial powers are not accountable for the exploitation of their country's former colonies. But, according to influential authors on the topic of historical responsibility such as Lukas Meyer (2005), they can be said to have duties of compensation to the descendants of the exploited people. The reasons mentioned by these authors are, first, the identity-constitutive ties that exist between present and previous generations, second, the benefits that the present generation still enjoys from the welfare brought by the exploitation of colonies, and, third, the underdevelopment of these countries that is said to be caused by exploitation. The issue of the limits of responsibility pops up when one tries to determine who can claim compensation. All members of a former colony's present generation? Only the poor members? A more general question is, how far back historical responsibility goes. The answers to these questions depend on one's stance in theoretical debates. The first theoretical debate is about the extent to which choices are determined by their – social, economic, and political – circumstances. To what extent are the poverty and underdevelopment of former colonies caused by past exploitation? To what extent are they the consequence of choices made in the post-colonial period by underdeveloped countries for which they themselves are responsible? Another theoretical debate concerns the so-called non-identity question: Can persons living today claim compensation because of the historical injustices committed against their ancestors if it is true that the claimants are not worse off than they would be if the injustice had not been committed because in this case they would have never come into existence?

The transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy is clearly the greatest challenge for the coming decennia. This raises the question of how we as individual persons should conceive of our prospective, global responsibility to future generations. Of course, we as individuals in the rich part of the world should reduce our carbon footprint by being careful about energy use, taking vacations closer to home, cutting beef consumption, putting photovoltaic panels on our roof, etc. Since we in these ways cannot reduce our carbon footprint to zero, we should try to offset our greenhouse gas emissions by compensating the receivers of the emissions, for instance by contributing to projects of renewable energy production in poorer countries. But even the most conscientious 'sustainable consumers' must recognise that there are limits to what individuals can do to tackle the problems of climate change. The reason is that there is a complex national and international energy system that includes governments, industry ranging from small companies to large multinationals, and national and international regulatory systems. Whether an energy transition will take place depends mainly on one or more of these players.

It goes without saying that our responsibility does not end at the limits of what we can do individually. At the same time, our individual responsibility is not limitless. We agree with Lucie Middlemiss who says, speaking about sustainability, that "... the individual's responsibility is dependent on having adequate personal and contextual (organisational, cultural and infrastructural) capacity." (Middlemiss 2010: 160). *Cultural capacity* refers to the culture, norms and values with which a person identifies, *organisational capacity* to the resources for sustainability offered by the organisations that a person is connected with, *infrastructural capacity* to the facilities for sustainable living (provided by government, business and community) which a person can access, and *personal capacity* to a person's resources for sustainability (e.g. understanding, finances, mobility) (Middlemiss 2010: 160, Fig. 1). Middlemiss develops a 'contextualised ecological footprint' that situates responsibility for sustainable consumption in the context of the capacity afforded to the individual by social structures. Thus, responsibilities of individuals can also be different for each person. Recognising that the individual's responsibility is limited by his or her capacity can "... also help people to address feelings of guilt associated with unfulfilled responsibility when consumers are unable to act" (2010: 163). A recent successful example of citizens using their capacities is the Hague provincial court case of the Dutch foundation Urgenda (2018) where the court ordered the State of the Netherlands to fulfil its obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% in 2020.

If we are convinced that all of us have, dependent on their capacities, the responsibility to support a policy of decarbonization, then we are confronted with the problem of which strategy of decarbonization we should show commitment to. Traditionally one has tried to reduce emissions by a system of carbon tax and market-based trade in emission permits. Others have argued that an effective transition to a carbon-free world requires large investments in research and development aimed at new sources of energy and large-scale technologies, making the use of new resources competitive.

To support a policy of decarbonization is an obligation to perform to the best of our capacities. But the issue of the limits of responsibility turns again up when it has to be decided which strategy should be followed. Both strategies mentioned have to contend with serious difficulties. For example, can the system of carbon tax and trade in emission permits ever be made effective? Which renewable resources of energy should be inquired into and developed: solar, wind, biomass, nuclear, geothermal, or gravity, or what energy portfolio should be sought? To decide which strategy is the right one, we would need much more knowledge and judgement than we at present have at our disposal.

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