



Dimensions of Responsibility

Emanuela Ceva¹ · Lubomira Radoilska²

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1 Introduction

The past couple of decades witnessed an explosion of responsibility studies, with a number of new topics and areas of research emerging along with intensified interest toward existing theories and approaches. Undoubtedly, this focus on responsibility has led to the advancement of much-needed resources for addressing, inter alia, new existential threats, including climate change and unprecedented technological developments in such areas as artificial intelligence. At the same time, however, the sheer volume and increasing complexity of the work conducted on different aspects of responsibility, across a variety of disciplines, resulted in a less welcome trend toward fragmentation of the debate into separate conversations.

Such conversations on the many dimensions of responsibility have featured prominently across a number of debates in practical philosophy, including legal, political, moral philosophy, and applied ethics. In order to make sense of the different strands of research they have originated, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* has dedicated its 20th Anniversary Conference to exploring them. The Conference was held in June 2017 at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Pavia. Alongside the keynote addresses by Carla Bagnoli, Ian Carter, and Antony Duff, it brought together scholars from different philosophical traditions to explore the dimensions along which the many issues concerning the idea of individual and collective responsibility play out and discuss its normative implications for the establishment of individual and collective rights and duties.

The seven papers selected for this 20th Anniversary Issue originate from that conference. They share the ambition of countering the trend of fragmenting the philosophical debate around responsibility by bringing together helpful insights on related dimensions of this idea and its implications. The discussion is organised around three main themes.

✉ Emanuela Ceva
emanuela.ceva@unipv.it

Lubomira Radoilska
L.V.Radoilska@kent.ac.uk

¹ Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Pavia, Corso Strada Nuova 65, 27100 Pavia, Italy

² Philosophy, University of Kent, Cornwallis Building, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NF, UK

1. *Accountability, Attributability, Answerability, Liability*

A finer-grained analysis of responsibility reveals consistent patterns of ascription where a more specific responsibility concept, such as accountability but not attributability, for instance, might be at work. What is the relationship between these concepts and their respective patterns of ascription? Is there a principled way of negotiating between the diverging conclusions we reach by following one instead of another pattern? In her paper, Robin Zheng addresses these issues by identifying two separate clusters of responsibility concerns, a backward- and a forward-looking one. While the former requires a conception of responsibility grounded in the metaphysics of agency, which according to Zheng is best understood in terms of *attributability*, the latter is suitably defined in moral and political terms that derive from the *accountability* individuals have for the way they perform in the *social roles* they happen to inhabit.

The paper by Antony Duff elucidates the relationship between *accountability*, *answerability* and *liability* by focussing on the logic of criminal justice proceedings. According to Duff, while both answerability and liability are aspects of accountability, answerability is key. The four criteria of answerability Duff identifies apply beyond concerns for fair trial to support the underlying idea of morality as a conversation between interlocutors bound to recognise each other as equals.

This idea is taken further by Emanuela Ceva and Lubomira Radoilska who argue for a new understanding of responsibility focussed on *reason-giving as a core dimension* that also underpins the better researched dimensions of intentional actions and attitudes toward others. According to Ceva and Radoilska, reason-giving is subject to stringent success criteria bringing together *backward-* and *forward-looking considerations*. By discussing the case of assigning individual responsibilities in such cases of problematic shared action as systemic corruption, the essay offers a common ground for *local conceptions of responsibility*, such as accountability, answerability, and attributability and explains which of the patterns of ascription is better suited to specific contexts.

2. *Individuals, Collectives, Practices, and Institutions*

Discussions of moral responsibility often concentrate on individual agents and their actions, sometimes in isolation from the social institutions and group belonging that make such actions possible in the first instance. On the other extreme, emphasising structural injustices and the unconscious psychological mechanisms, through which they typically get perpetrated, might prompt a similar gap between collective and individual-level analysis. This gap generates a number of puzzles with respect to the moral appraisal of groups and individuals' actions, the fair allocation of rights and duties within and across political communities, and the very possibility of social change and concerted action.

Gianfranco Pellegrino offers a principled way of addressing these and related concerns in the context of climate change. The contributive view that Pellegrino puts forward highlights the interactions between the causal and non-causal aspects of individual responsibility for collective harms. While the former requires establishing a degree of *likelihood*, the latter tracks *mere possibility*. This analysis supports the ascription of a *robust yet differential responsibility* for climate change to individuals, in addition to institutional and collective obligations.

Ian Carter considers a related puzzle, about *collective responsibility for individual choices*. The puzzle arises for proponents of the *starting-gate* interpretation of the principle of *equality of opportunity*, who are nevertheless struck by the intuitive unfairness of asking individuals to

shoulder on their own the *extreme outcomes* of the unwise choices they made long time ago. The solution proposed by Carter is to introduce some minimally prudent restrictions on individual choices at the starting-gate point. Such a policy would not undermine the *liability* that individuals have for their own choices over time and will, therefore, be consistent with treating all individuals in accordance with the demands of *opacity respect* within a community of moral equals.

The paper by Ceva and Radoilska contributes to this theme too by building on a *continuist* interpretation of *systemic corruption*, according to which there cannot be institutional corruption in the absence of corrupt individual actions. Following this interpretation, the authors argue that the *public unavowability* that characterises systemic corruption as a *sustained practice* rests on the thorough yet misleading redescription corrupt individuals readily offer when giving reasons for their involvement in these activities. The fact that these redescriptions are typically not presented with the explicit intention to deceive points to a kind of *tainted reasoning* at the interface between epistemic vice and disadvantage, best understood as a *sui generis* form of (rather than ground for diminished) responsibility.

3. *Harms and Wrongs*

Responding appropriately to harms, e.g. by preventing them, identifying and holding to account the responsible, apologising to the harmed or making some other amends, is an essential aspect of many practices, which responsibility studies seek to inform. Yet, on closer inspection, the notion of harm might not be sufficient to fulfil all dialectical tasks that it has been called to perform. Björn Petersson's paper raises an important challenge in this respect. By reflecting on the intuitive yet misleading appeal of the *plural harm principle*, Petersson demonstrates it to be the effect of imperceptible shifts in distributive and collective readings of *plurality* in instances of *over-determination*. This conclusion is significant as it indicates that, in these instances, the notion of harm cannot account for the *wrongness* of getting involved, which requires an independent analysis of *co-responsibility*. The argument has wider implications for revisiting the relationship between harm and responsibility. According to Petersson, anyone persuaded by the *simple counterfactual analysis* of harm as making a difference to the worse will have to supply a further account of *what makes a harmful act wrong* to avoid a similar challenge to the one affecting the plural harm principle.

Carla Bagnoli identifies and explores a *distinctive wrong* arising in cases of *successful coercion*. As Bagnoli shows, standard approaches to coercion overlook this wrong in virtue of interpreting coerced agency as obstructed or diminished in scope, whereby the coercee is less of an agent and more of a tool at the hands of the coercer. Yet, successful coercion builds on the *mutual recognition* between parties as rational agents. This recognition has a deeply corrosive effect on the moral agency of the coercees that can only be offset by *their claiming responsibility* for acting under duress. This insight is echoed in the *Role-Ideal Model* developed by Zheng, where individual role-holders are encouraged to take up responsibility for the ways, in which their agency improves structural relationships or, indeed, fails to do so.