

## ARE WE MORALLY RESPONSIBLE?

*Dr. Thomas W. Smythe,*

Retired Associate Professor of Philosophy  
North Carolina Central University, USA

### ABSTRACT

Moral responsibility presents certain rules that are set forth to guide the human beings to live with certain principles that enlighten and flourish the human beings. The current essay discusses about the moral responsibility in the perspective of two different authors and the current authors' stand. The paper provides valuable insights on how moral responsibility is approached by different authors and how it is cited in the current study. The future researchers can explore the moral responsibility related theories to further enrich the study for the betterment of the community.

**Keywords:** Responsibility; Luck; Praiseworthy; Punishment.

## INTRODUCTION:

Aristotle (384–323 BCE) seems to have been the first to construct a theory of moral responsibility (Eshleman, 2016). The term responsibility is defined by Vincent E. Barry when used in business affairs, as referring to “*a sphere of duty or obligation assigned to a person by the nature of that person's position, function, or work.*” (Barry, 1979). Moral rules are rigid in almost all the cases and followers are expected to obey it strictly (Bartels. D., Bauman. W. C., Cushman. A. F., Pizarro. A. D., & Peter M. A., 2015). For example, in a diplomatic situation when the dying patient requests a doctor to ingest drugs that end his or her life immediately, but this is completely opposite to the moral rule that a doctor should not ill-treat a patient irrespective of their identities and requests (Bartels et al., 2015).

The Philosophical reflection on moral responsibility has historically relied upon one of two broad interpretations of the concept: 1) *the merit-based view*, according to which praise or blame would be an appropriate reaction toward the candidate if and only if she merits—in the sense of ‘deserves’—such a reaction; or 2) *the consequentialist view*, according to which praise or blame would be appropriate if and only if a reaction of this sort would likely lead to a desired change in the agent and/or her behavior. In this sense, ‘responsibility’ refers to more than just the primary function of a role; it refers to the multiple facets of that function—both processes and outcomes (and the consequences of the acts performed as part of that bundle of obligations (Bivins, 2012).

According to Fischer (2010), moral responsibility involves a freedom or control component and an epistemic component. He also mentioned that moral responsibility requires control which are of two types such as guidance and regulative control. In Responsibility and Control, an argument placed by Fischer and Ravizza (1998), that guidance control is the freedom-relevant condition which is more than enough for moral responsibility. According to them, the moral responsibility of self is due to the presence of guidance control though there is absence of regulative control.

Further they added that though guidance control (and, thus, moral responsibility) does not necessarily imply praiseworthiness or blameworthiness, the latter do imply the former and one can have guidance control without regulative control. According to ethics activist Geoff Hunt (n.d.), ‘accountability’ is “*the readiness or preparedness to give an explanation or justification to relevant others (stakeholders) for one's judgments, intentions, acts and omissions when appropriately called upon to do so. It is [also] a readiness to have one's actions judged by others and, where appropriate, accept responsibility for errors, misjudgments and negligence and recognition for competence, conscientiousness, excellence and wisdom. It is a preparedness to change in the light of improved understanding gained from others*”

## PURPOSE OF THE ESSAY:

In the current essay, the author has compared two essays those of Thomas Nagel (1979) and Waller (2005). The essay does explore the cases which are ill taken and ill-considered by these authors. Since some of the arguments were not supportive towards people and making them morally irresponsible, the essay place some of the valuable arguments to defend this.

### First Essay:

In the first essay titled ‘Moral Luck’ written by the author, Thomas Nagel argues that irrespective of the outcome i.e., either success or failure, it usually depends on factors that are largely out of our control. Any important moral act is partly determined by external factors. He construes "moral luck" to be present when we treat a person as an object of moral assessment even when a significant part of what the person does depends on factors that are beyond their control (Nagel, 1979). For good measure, he says, "*Ultimately, nothing or almost nothing about what a person does seems to be under his control.*" (Nagel, 226). He concludes that almost all moral judgments are illegitimate.

### First Example:

A reckless driver who runs a red traffic light and hits a pedestrian, he says it is a matter of luck whether or not he hit, because it is not up to him as to whether a pedestrian happens to be in the way of his car. However this judgement is opposed by the author stating that the driver who is driving recklessly should have some responsibility. It seems the injunction "*Do not drive recklessly, period!*" is one that everyone ought to follow, and is morally responsible for doing so. It is up to you whether you drive recklessly, and you ought never to do so. A person chooses to drive recklessly or when intoxicated or compromised, and they should know the risk they are taking. The author justifies this statement using Bivins (2012, 21) one of the example for moral obligations. He mentioned that a person can be accounted if the person is functionally and/or morally

responsible for an action or in anyway, he or she harms another person through the action and the responsible person is not asking any legitimate excuse for the action.

**Second Example:**

Nagel cites that when a man is forced to be an officer in a Nazi concentration camp who is willing to lead a quiet and harmless life, he ends up as a war criminal due to his bad luck as the Germany was captured by Nazis. In the scenario, the author supports Nagel's arguments since the person, even when unwilling to work as an officer, continue to do the same because he has no option rather than to perform or otherwise he would be shot dead if he did not serve as an officer in the Nazi concentration camp. In his book, Duff (2007) mentions that offences "define presumptive public wrongs" (217), "conduct that we have, in the law's eyes, reason not to engage in" (218) whereas defences "[do] not deny responsibility for the offence charged, but [claim] that further relevant factors should block liability" (263). In this case, the officer is forced to do so, or otherwise, he wouldn't have performed such an war criminal act.

**Third Example:**

Next example cited by Nagel is about 'Luck' in the way things turn out. In case a truck driver who has got a failed brakes in this truck, hit a child, he argues that it is neither the responsibility of the driver, nor the child, but it is just due to bad luck. that the child just happened to be there to be hit, and the driver has no control over this. The author argues that in spite of the conditions, the driver should've checked the brakes before even starting the truck. The driver should be made responsible for getting the truck fixed. The author mentioned the case of Duff (2012) to justify this statement.

**Fourth Example:**

The fourth example Nagel gives is when someone negligently has too much to drink and his car swerves off the road, when there unluckily happens to be a pedestrian there. He says he cannot blame the driver for hitting the pedestrian because it is just his bad luck that the pedestrian happens to be there. The author argues that One is morally responsible if they decide to get drunk and then drive. Whether there is a pedestrian in the way or not is irrelevant. No one should ever drink and drive, period! To do so is morally reprehensible. The author further mentions that legal responsibility though suggestive, will not be a reliable to guide moral responsibility (Thompson, 1980)

**Fifth Example:**

The fifth example Nagel uses is to say that the penalty for attempted murder is less than the penalty for successfully murdering someone, and the difference is a matter of luck because one has no control over whether the victim happened to be wearing a bulletproof vest, or whether a bird flies into the path of a bullet.

According to the author, attempted murder is equally wrong and should be sentenced as who did murdered someone. This directly means that one should not attempt murder, period! (One gets the suspicion that Plato was a much better philosopher.) Nagel does have a point, however. Citing the essay, the author mentioned an example with two characters such as Jones and Smith in which if Jones intends to murder Smith, and is thwarted, even though he attempts to murder Smith, then he should not be punished as severely as if he succeeded because he did not actually commit the crime or murder.

But in such a case, it is more serious if you commit a crime than if you try and fail. This is a justified belief. The current opines that this is a scenario which mandates the legal revision as Jones fully intends to murder Smith, attempts to do so, and fails for reasons Nagel gives, he should receive the same punishment as someone who succeeds in murdering Smith. A person who tries to bomb a hospital, and the bomb fails to explode, should be given the same treatment as he would if the bomb had gone off and killed lots of people.

The underlying principle is the same. It is wrong to kill people for no good reason. There is culpable ignorance. The author mentions that irrespective of the success or failure of the act, if it is found guilty, the person who committed the wrong must be sentenced legally without any consideration as ethical and moral responsibilities should be in place as cited elsewhere (Bivins, 2012).

**Sixth Example:**

The sixth example Nagel uses is one about political revolutions. He says that if a revolution is successful, then the leaders are heroes even though they have little control over the outcome. If it fails the leaders are blamed for the terrible consequences given to the participants of the "insurrection." Such cases are decisions under uncertainty. According to Barrett (2004), Moral responsibility assumes a capacity for making rational decisions, which in turn justifies holding moral agents accountable for their actions. But, on the contrary, he also added that people who lack capacity for rational decision-making cannot be held morally responsible for their actions. But as per the author's views, the leaders of a revolution need to hold some responsibility to estimate the likelihood of victory, and making sure the participants are motivated. There is also such a thing as a good leader

and a good general. But the author here supports Nagel stating that a revolutionary leader often has little control over the success of the undertaking.

#### **Seventh Example:**

In the next scenario, Nagel asks us to consider a case where a mother leaves the water running, with a baby in the bathtub. It is a matter of luck, he says, whether the mother returns in time to prevent the baby from drowning. If the baby is safe, it is carelessness; if it is too late, the situation is dire and the mother gets blamed. This is again a consequence-based and the owner of the action cannot take responsibility.

In the notion of blameworthiness, three key items are present such as moral, rather than social or legal, Not-relative to worldly considerations but rather a matter of deserving blame in some abstract and the third is act of freely willing either one's own bad action or harm in the world (Smiley, 2010). The author replied to the above scenario as one should never, under any circumstances short of being forcefully assaulted, for any reason, leave the baby in the bathtub with the water running, period! To do so is a central case of moral blameworthiness. (This confirms my suspicion that philosophers can say just about anything.)

#### **Eighth Example:**

The final example cited by Nagel is constitutive luck. Nagel argues that qualities of temperament and personality are not under our control. We do not choose our virtues and vices, so we cannot be blamed for them. An unkind, cold person cannot help feeling a certain way, or having certain impulses. Something like conceit is not something one has any control over. This is an extremely difficult question to assess for a moral philosopher. We do not know all the variables that figure into making us the kind of person we are. The above cited examples and the author's justifications provides valuable insights with regards to approaching a scenario in terms of moral responsibility.

In five out of the eight examples he gives, Nagel blatantly fails to show a lack of culpability on the part of the agent. The reckless driver, the failed brakes, the drunk, the would-be murderer, and the outrageous example of the baby in the bathtub, all fail to support Nagel's thesis. In each case, there is a clear example of moral accountability, and moral blame is quite appropriate. One should never drive recklessly, one should check their brakes, one should never drink and drive, one should never attempt murder, and one should never leave a baby in the bathtub with the water running. Moreover, and this is the important point, an agent is just as morally responsible in those five cases I questioned, for either outcome.. If this is the best that moral philosophy has to offer, we are in trouble as moral philosophers. The author conclude that Nagel does not make his case against moral responsibility. He only shows that in some cases we are not responsible. The man forced to be a Nazi officer is his best example.

#### **Second Essay:**

As mentioned earlier, the second philosopher whom the author examine is more subtle. In a recent text, Bruce N. Waller continues an argument he has made for years. Waller agrees with Nagel that we are never justified in holding anyone morally responsible whether they do good deeds or act badly (Waller, 2005).

Waller begins by distinguishing between role responsibility and moral responsibility. Although it is not clear, he seems to mean by role responsibility that a person does what is required of them, or what one says they will do. He gives an example of someone who accepts the role of bringing a keg of beer to a picnic. Role responsibility does not entail moral responsibility. If a person fulfills their role responsibility by bringing the keg to the picnic, it does not follow that they are morally responsible for doing so. Similar considerations apply if the person fails to bring the keg to the picnic, thus failing to fulfill their role responsibility. It does not follow that they are morally responsible for not bringing the keg. If one has the sneaking suspicion that no one is ever morally responsible for anything, you are right, according to Waller. The role responsibility and the moral responsibility were discussed by various authors earlier which are as cited in this paper earlier (Bartels et al., 2015; Duff, 2012). Although Waller is not at all explicit, the author take him to mean at least the following by 'moral responsibility':

X is morally responsible for Y if

- (1) X could have refrained from doing Y.
- (2) X is morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for Y.
- (3) X is deserving of reward or punishment for Y.

It strikes me that you can have (1) without having (2) and (3), and you can have (1) and (2) without having (3). Waller seems to think that we often have (1), but we can never attribute (2) or (3) to anyone. He gives several examples to support his case. One case, the author gives, is of a man who was given death penalty in Florida and claimed moral responsibility for his murder.

The author says that the man, named John, had been a well-behaved kid until age 11. But one day when he returned home from school to discover that his dad, who he dearly loved, had committed suicide. After that John lost all interest in life, became a drifter and a drunk, and eventually killed another drifter in a violent argument. The author argues that John's claim to be morally responsible for his action does not show that he was actually morally responsible. In another example, a woman Donna makes her own decisions and leads an exemplary moral life. She takes full responsibility for her actions. The author says that Donna takes role responsibility for her life, but that it is still an open question whether she can take moral responsibility. This is because she is a product of her environment that she was lucky and fortunate to have. Barrett (2004) justified this scenario stating that moral responsibility is based on the environment and by the self.

In an extension of the Donna case, suppose Donna works for a corporation and is offered an opportunity to rake in a large profit from a CEO when the stock price of the corporation is very high. But the books have been fixed to cover up enormous losses. Donna is offered a chance to sell her stock and make an enormous financial profit. However, given the kind of person she is, she cannot bring herself to do such a thing. Is she morally responsible for her decision? The author says 'no' because Donna to do such a thing.

But one can think of an example where Donna does want to reap a windfall, where she is sorely tempted to, but through great moral effort, refrains from doing so. She exercises constraint and overcomes her desire. Is she morally responsible? Nope! Not in this case either, according to the author. She is just lucky to have had the early environment where she was so educated that she could overcome her devious desires.

It seems that there is no possible example that one can give in which someone is morally responsible, according to the author. The author even says that in a case where the agent is free to choose to be a bank robber, does so choose, and values her life as a bank robber, since those choices are just a product of luck somewhere in her past, she is not morally responsible. According to Friedman (1970), a corporate executive (manager) has a direct responsibility to his or her employers, and that is to conduct business in accordance with their desires, which is generally to make as much money as possible. But choosing in according to the moral responsibility is based on the individual. The author goes on to say that even though we cannot morally praise or blame someone for their virtues and vices, we can still judge the agent to be virtuous or vicious. But no one ever, under any circumstances whatsoever, deserves moral praise or blame, reward or punishment.

It seems to follow that when Sirhan Sirhan killed Bobby Kennedy by shooting him point blank in the back of his head, when Charles Manson coldly calculated, planned, and carried out the Tate murders, and when a fanatic bombed a hospital in Oklahoma City killing hundreds, they were not morally responsible agents. It was just their bad luck that somewhere along the line they developed the disposition to murder someone. It seems to follow that no matter what a person does, no matter how outrageous (the mother who forgets to turn off the water with her baby in the tub), no one is ever morally responsible. Waller says, *"If we really understand what shaped people to be the way they are (if we 'walked a mile in their shoes') we would feel less inclined to demand retribution"* (2005: 224).

I find the fact that a moral philosopher can take this position to be utterly astonishing. It seems to me that there is such a thing as every person trying to make themselves better by learning from their past mistakes. If you marry someone, and have to get divorced because they treat you badly, then you try to do better next time. It seems that each of us has an obligation to make ourselves better. If we do not try to improve, we are blameworthy, everything else being equal. If someone does not try to improve themselves, this is not bad luck; it is shirking the very responsibility of what it is to be a person. According to Winston Charles (n.d.), when a man and a woman marry, they become one flesh in the eyes of God; in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer. Though they are given legal freedom to choose apart, it is one's own responsibility to keep the relationship alive.

## CONCLUSION:

The author stresses the importance of doing well while one is alive. He adds that "I do not know why we are here, but I do not believe we are here to be moral failures. A person who has defects in their character can recognize that they do by virtue of the reactions of others to their shortcomings. If I am mean to my wife, she will most likely be mean to me. It does not take a high IQ to figure out that it is better to treat other people well, if you want to be so treated. A man who beats his wife just because she cannot bring herself to do it".

According to the author, every human being, by virtue of the fact of being human, is under a moral imperative to live a life worthy of a human being. This means that they should undertake to develop such virtues as honesty, kindness, courage, and loyalty. They should acquire knowledge and develop a consistent and coherent worldview. It is incumbent upon us to develop critical thinking and reasoning skills. If someone cannot do this,

then they need to be given care and be put under the control of some kind authorities.

People who cannot think for themselves and tend to choose the right thing to do are defective human beings, and need to be educated or looked after by someone who can guide them to do the right thing. A person is a moral agent that ought to develop what Aristotle called the moral and intellectual virtues. If they do not, they are a failure at life. If they cannot, they need loving care and control by others who are qualified, and they should not be in a position of authority over others. This may require some luck, but it is a moral imperative inherent in what it is to be human. Anyone who shirks their responsibility to be a good person is denying their own personhood.

In some cases these philosophers are right. We are wrong to place blame when a person involuntarily does something wrong. But there are also cases of culpable ignorance where we are justified in blaming or incarcerating a person. These philosophers are extremists on the issue. This essay focuses on the moral responsibility related arguments on two authors' essays. Though not taken on either side, the author still propose to place the arguments that are valuable, insightful and useful for the future researchers to present a combination of different authors and their views on moral responsibility. The future researchers are advised to study, compare and contrast the different models on moral responsibility in terms of workplace, self, family and the environment.

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