

CHAPTER ONE

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND MORAL IMAGINATION

1. THE METAPHOR OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

The rhetoric of 'responsibility' is prominent in the research ethics debate, not least in discussions about genetics and genetic engineering. It is also very common in political and religious discourse. But the term is elusive. It is seldom defined. It is also a rather new term in Western ethical discourse. The term 'responsibility' first appeared in English, German and French in the 17th century (Jonsen, 1968, p. 3). However, it has its etymological roots in the Latin word 'respondeo', which actually has two different but connected root meanings. In the first sense, the term has to do with 'answering'. For example, it could be a matter of giving an answer when called to appear in a legal court or another tribunal. In the second sense, the word 'respondeo' is related to 'accounting'. We owe things to others due to promises or financial debts. It is also possible to see accountability as a special form of answering to others (Schweiker, 1995, pp. 55-56).

In the moral context, 'responsibility' is used metaphorically. It is not a matter of actually answering in a legal court or actually being in a state of financial debt. It is only metaphorically so. The term is used metaphorically in ways corresponding to each of the two root meanings. When the focus is on 'answering', we have an aural/oral metaphor. It is a matter of listening to others or to one's own self or conscience and providing an answer. A typical question is: why did you do it? (cf. Lucas, 1993, pp. 5,6). Another question could be an implicit one in the form of a need of another person that demands some kind of response. Let us call this the 'response' metaphor. When the focus is on 'accounting', we have a financial metaphor. We owe things to others and others owe things to us. We can be in a state of moral obligation to act in a particular way. Let us call this the 'owing' metaphor. In practical discourse, these two metaphors of responsibility are often mixed.

A Variety of Uses

The word 'responsibility' is used in many different ways. The most basic use is perhaps 'being responsible'. A person is responsible for an act or an act of omission.

In a similar way, we talk about ‘bearing responsibility’ and ‘having responsibility’. Sometimes we refer to causal responsibility. A person is causally responsible if he or she has caused an action by free will. At other times we refer to moral or legal responsibility. When we use the phrase ‘being responsible’ as well as most of the other phrases below, we often add ‘to’ and ‘for’. A person is responsible *to* someone *for* something.

We also talk about ‘holding someone responsible’. Often ‘to hold someone responsible’ is to blame or praise him or her because of something the person has done. A typical example is when we blame someone for the harm resulting from that person’s actions. This assigning of responsibility is backward-looking. However, the assigning of responsibility may also be forward-looking. We may say to someone: “In the future, we will hold you responsible whatever happens.”

Another use of the term ‘responsibility’ has to do with ‘taking responsibility’. It is a matter of accepting or ‘assuming’ responsibility. Even here we find both backward-looking and forward-looking uses of the phrase. We may take responsibility for something that has already happened, but we may also take responsibility for what will happen in the future.

Sometimes we talk about ‘having responsibility’. A person may have responsibility for an activity or an institution. In such cases, the person has often been appointed to a special social position or social role.

Often, responsibility is just shorthand for ‘obligation’. ‘To have a responsibility’ is to have an obligation. This obligation can be a matter of obeying strictly defined rules, or can refer to a responsibility for a certain area or domain where it is not predetermined in detail how one should decide or act in each particular situation.

The word is also used in a normative sense. It is a matter of ‘being a responsible person’ or ‘acting in a responsible way’. In the former case, responsibility is a virtue. A responsible person is someone with certain good traits of character, and who acts in a particular way. Such a person is often considered to be ‘responsive’ to the needs of others. When we talk about ‘acting in a responsible way’, ‘responsible’ refers to the formal characteristics of good behavior. The expression may also be used as an imperative—‘Be responsible!’—meaning that we should take our actions seriously and act on the basis of conscious deliberation.

Below I shall discuss each one of these uses more extensively. Let me first, however, make a comment on the distinctions among responsibility as a matter of obligation, as a matter of virtue, and as a matter of blame and praise.

Some might think that what is important in research ethics are the aspects of obligation and virtue, not that of blame and praise. They would argue that what is interesting is what geneticists should do or not do from an ethical point of view, not whether geneticists are to be blamed or praised for what they are doing. I agree to some extent but not entirely. The moral obligations and virtues of geneticists are of central importance but the issue of blame and praise is also vital. Scientific research is a social activity. Some social groups blame scientists for some aspects of what

they are doing, other groups praise them. This is obvious not least with regard to 'hot' topics such as genetics and animal experimentation. We need an understanding of what this means more precisely. A key issue is: is there a 'real' moral responsibility beyond this socially attributed one, or is the socially attributed moral responsibility all there is?

Being Morally Responsible

'Being morally responsible' (or 'bearing moral responsibility' or 'having moral responsibility') is no doubt the aspect of responsibility that has received the most attention in the philosophical debate. In a sense it is also the most basic one. One's view on this aspect will to a large extent determine one's view on the other aspects. For these reasons, I will devote more space to this aspect than to the others.

The philosophical debate on moral responsibility has almost completely focused on the issue of free will and determinism. This can be seen, for instance, in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* where the term 'responsibility' does not have a place of its own but is discussed under the heading of 'Free will problem' (Audi (gen. ed.), 1995). However, this approach is not particularly fruitful in a discussion of moral responsibility in science. An approach that brings social aspects to the discussion is preferable.

Agential Models and Social Models

We may distinguish two main kinds of models of moral responsibility, both of which address the question of the ground of moral responsibility. The first kind of model focuses on causal agency. Individual moral responsibility for a particular state of affairs, for example harm to other people, depends on whether the individual has caused it by an act or an act of omission. Causal agency determines in itself moral responsibility. I will call these kinds of models 'agential models' (cf. Schweiker, 1995, p. 78).

According to agential models, causal agency and moral responsibility constitute one single moral fact. If an individual agent has caused the state of affairs, then he or she is morally responsible for it. This means, in addition, that moral responsibility should be kept separate from social blame and praise (see e.g. Feinberg, 1970, pp. 30-31; Frankena, 1973, pp. 71-72; Glover, 1970, p. 96). Moral responsibility is 'real' responsibility in distinction to merely socially ascribed responsibility. Moral blame or praise on the one hand, and social blame or praise on the other, might differ. Moral responsibility is a moral fact to be discovered, although established social practices may make it difficult to do so.

Ontologically, agential models of moral responsibility are based on an individualist account of the relation between individuals and society. They presuppose that the individual self in a fundamental sense is independent of society

('social atomism'). Since the individual is independent, the only morally relevant aspect is whether he or she has caused the state of affairs. Whether society ascribes or does not ascribe responsibility is simply irrelevant from a moral point of view.

The second kind of model focuses on social role. Here the ground of moral responsibility is not causal agency in itself but social practices of blame and praise. This means that moral responsibility is not separated from socially ascribed responsibility (see e.g. French, 1992, pp. 55-70; Smiley, 1992). Let us call these models 'social models' (cf. Schweiker, 1995, p. 86). They give a picture of responsibility that differs substantially from that of agential models. We can rightly hold individuals fully responsible for a state of affairs that they did not directly or even indirectly cause by an act or an act of omission. This is because social practices of blame and praise are linked to social roles. Moral responsibility is a social construction, not a simple moral fact. It is ascribed by the community or a particular social group, not discovered. The content of responsibility is what one's social position or role demands. If one does not live up to this standard, one may be blamed.

In distinction to agential models, social models of moral responsibility are not based on an individualist ontology. On the contrary, they presuppose that the individual self is socially constituted ('social holism'), the product of social influences. Without a community there is no individual self. And because this is the case, moral responsibility is socially determined. Causal agency does not in itself determine moral responsibility. Responsibility depends on social role.

The difference between the two kinds of models can be illustrated by the example of a junior scientist who presents poorly substantiated experimental results. Who is morally responsible, the junior scientist or the leader of the research team?

From the perspective of agential models, it is natural to take the distinction between direct and indirect causal responsibility as a starting point, and state that the junior scientist is directly causally responsible because he is the one who has actually carried out the experiments, while the research leader is only indirectly causally responsible because he gave improper or insufficient instructions to the junior scientist. Given these facts of causal responsibility, the junior scientist is fully morally responsible while the research leader is not.

From the point of view of social models, on the other hand, it is possible to maintain that the research leader can be fully morally responsible although he is only indirectly causally responsible. It is also possible to state that the junior scientist is not fully morally responsible in spite of the fact that he is directly causally responsible. What is decisive are the social roles of the research leader and the junior scientist, not the causal relations. The social role of the research leader implies that he is fully morally responsible for whatever happens in the work of his team, while the junior scientist has no such social role.

A Modified Social Model

Both kinds of models, as they have been presented here, neglect the metaphorical character of the concept of moral responsibility. However, they can both be interpreted as focusing on two different aspects of the 'being responsible' metaphor, namely causal agency and social role. Moreover, both aspects have their valid points. Both represent important aspects of moral responsibility. The problem is how to combine them. In my opinion, social role is the primary in the sense that the moral relevance of causal agency should be determined within the framework of social role (practice). Causal agency is commonly relevant to moral responsibility but does not in itself determine it. My proposal is therefore best described as a modified social model. It avoids the weaknesses of both kinds of models, while acknowledging their valid aspects.

What are the weak aspects of the agential models of moral responsibility? First, the agential models do not recognize the social character of moral responsibility. This is seen in their separation of 'real' moral responsibility from socially ascribed responsibility. There is no completely compelling argument against this separation but there are at least some good reasons. The first is that the question of whether there is a 'real' moral responsibility is theoretically open. There are many conflicting views on the matter. There is no general consensus, and one view might be as good as another. Another reason is that the question is practically meaningless. There is no intersubjective method to settle the matter in practice. The question is also practically uninteresting. What is really important in this world is what beliefs social groups actually have and try to implement in practice. Combined, these reasons suggest that moral responsibility has no backing beyond the community.

Moreover, agential models conflate causal agency and moral responsibility. Causal agency does not in itself determine moral responsibility. It is obvious that individuals, due to their social role, can be morally responsible even when the causal connection to a state of affairs is very indirect or even nonexistent. And conversely, individuals might be only to a very limited extent morally responsible even when they have very directly causally contributed. There are commonly certain causal connections, but a causal connection does not in itself determine moral responsibility. Causal agency should be understood within the framework of social practice (role).

The agential models also wrongly assume that moral responsibility is a matter of discovery. On the contrary, moral responsibility is a matter of ascription (and, as we shall see, assumption). Such ascription of responsibility is based on causal as well as value judgments. In the causal judgment one makes an interpretation of a situation and focuses on a particular part of a causal chain or a particular link in a causal network instead of other parts or links. In doing so, a particular individual may be singled out as *the* cause of a state of affairs. The individual's causal contribution to the state of affairs may indeed be very indirect. This is so because in framing the situation, different individuals are given different social roles, and these roles may

Responsible Genetics

The Moral Responsibility of Geneticists for the
Consequences of Human Genetics Research

Nordgren, A.

2001, XIX, 276 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0201-4