
Abstract

This chapter illustrates the different meanings of responsibility and establishes a link between this notion and the concepts of social action and social relation. The etymology of the word responsibility is examined and, by referring to philosophy and legal theory, the semantic complexity of this notion is addressed. The emphasis on action, its consequences and their assessment are considered as the key elements of responsibility. Three “modes of enactment” of responsibility (assumption, ascription, subjection) are distinguished as establishing different links between these elements in social processes. Max Weber’s definition of social action, which is an action oriented to the behaviour of others, is introduced to translate in sociological terms the “orientation to others” that the etymology of the word responsibility suggests. Drawing from Weber’s theory of action, responsibility is then seen as a combination of instrumentally rational and value-rational actions, which are social, in Weber’s sense, because they are oriented, in terms of causal consequences and meanings, to the behaviour of others. Following Max Weber again, “responsibility relations” are then seen as constituted by the mutual orientation of the three modes of enactment.

2.1 Responsibility: Explorations in Conceptual Semantics

In the broader context of his discussion on justice, Paul Ricoeur devotes a part of his work to the concept of responsibility. The French philosopher notices the semantic diversity and ambiguity of this notion in today’s society. He writes: “we are surprised that a term with such a firm sense on the juridical plane should be of such recent origin and not really well established within the philosophical tradi-

tion. Next, the current proliferation and dispersion of uses of this term is puzzling, especially because they go well beyond the limits established for its juridical use” (Ricoeur 2000, 11). In another passage from the same essay, Ricoeur notices that “[i]n the first place, you are responsible for the consequences of your acts, but also responsible for others’ actions to the extent that they were done under your charge or care, and eventually far beyond even this measure. At the limit, you are responsible for everything and everyone” (Ricoeur 2000, 11–12).

The words of the French philosopher show that the notion of responsibility appears to be semantically undetermined and that it has blurred and permeable boundaries with other conceptual spheres. This indeterminacy is not a marginal issue. As Schütz noticed, concept formation facilitates the contextualisation of other situations, objects and feelings, reducing the complexity and the problematic features of human experience (Schütz 1953, 1974). Concepts are the tools through which one can possibly understand and explain such an experience. From these premises, the importance of a clear definition of responsibility also emerges when dealing with science and technology. Ricoeur warns of the tensions arising as a result of this indeterminacy. He believes there is a tension between the possibility of responsibility assignment (being held responsible for my actions and their consequences) and the duty of solidarity (taking responsibility for common circumstances or risks). In his own words, “human action is possible only on the condition of a concrete arbitration between the short-term vision of a responsibility limited to the foreseeable and controllable effects of an action and the long-term vision of an unlimited responsibility. Simply neglecting the side effects of an action would render it dishonest, but an unlimited responsibility would make action impossible” (Ricoeur 2002, 33).⁶

For the purposes of this book, this short reference to the work of Ricoeur shows that addressing responsibility in the context of S&T requires dealing with the semantic complexity of this notion. Our starting point in this semantic exploration is the etymology of the word. It derives from the Latin verb *respondeo* and from its root *spondeo* (Bonito Oliva 2007, Miano 2009, Gorgoni 2011). This origin links the notion of responsibility to two related meanings. On the one hand, responsibility is

6 This dilemmatic perspective differentiates Ricoeur from the work of Emmanuel Levinas among others. According to Levinas, the unlimited openness to others is constitutive of human nature and identity. In terms of responsibility, this Author affirms that “I acknowledge my responsibility of everything that can happen to others [...]. As intersubjective relationships are asymmetrical, I am responsible of the other regardless of the fact that the other can be responsible for me too” (Levinas in Miano 2009, 101). As a general rule, translations from editions in languages other than English were made by the authors.

related to the idea of responding to somebody for something. On the other hand, this concept is connected to the idea of committing to someone for something. The latter follows from the technical legal meaning of the Latin verb *spondeo*: standing in court as a guarantor, providing a guarantee for the debts of somebody who is summoned before a court, or even standing as a guarantor of the commitment of a spouse to a husband. This short etymological digression tells us something important about the meaning of responsibility. First, we are always responsible to somebody. Second, we can be responsible in different ways: we can take responsibility for the future behaviour of somebody, but we can also be called to respond for the failures of someone else.

To go further in an exercise of “conceptual semantics” (Ricoeur 2002), we can read the short story that follows:⁷

(1) Smith had always been an exceedingly responsible person, (2.) and as captain of the ship he was responsible of the safety of his passengers and crew. But on his last voyage he drank himself into a stupor, (3) and he was responsible for the loss of his ship and many lives. (4) Smith’s defense attorney argued that the alcohol and his transient depression were responsible for his misconduct, (5) the prosecution’s medical experts confirmed that he was fully responsible when he started drinking since he was not suffering from depression at that time. (6) Smith should take responsibility for his victims’ families’ losses but his employer will probably be held responsible for them as Smith is insolvent and uninsured. (Vincent 2011, 16)

Nicole Vincent used this short story to highlight six different meanings of responsibility: (1) as a virtue, which refers to character traits, reputation and intentions that qualify individuals as ‘responsible’ (“Smith had always been an exceedingly responsible person”); (2) as a role, which refers to duties arising from plural social roles, including the formal or the institutional ones (“as captain of the ship Smith was responsible for the safety of his passengers and crew”); (3) as an outcome, which covers the outcomes (events or states of affairs) for which a person is held responsible (“Smith was responsible for the loss of his ship and many lives”); (4) as a cause, which concerns the causal links between events or actions and states of affairs (“alcohol and his transient depression were responsible for Smith’s misconduct”); (5) as a capacity, which covers the cognitive and physical capacities that an agent needs in order to be deemed responsible; these personal characteristics are distinct from character traits, which are covered by virtue responsibility (“Smith was fully responsible when he started drinking since he was not suffering from depression

7 The story was originally proposed by Hart (1968). The quote here refers to the modified version one can find in Vincent (2011).

at that time”⁸); (6) as a liability, which refers to the treatment the responsible agent has to suffer as a consequence of his / her action (“Smith should take responsibility for his victims’ families’ losses”).

Vincent’s classification develops the classical work of Herbert Lionel Adolphus Hart on *Punishment and Responsibility* (1968) which explored the same topic from the point of view of legal theory. Hart originally proposed four meanings of responsibility: (a) role-responsibility; (b) causal-responsibility; (c) liability-responsibility; (d) capacity-responsibility (Hart 1968, 212). Causal responsibility regards what caused something to happen and can be attributed to any causally efficacious factor, without any implication that praise or blame is being attributed. Capacity responsibility refers to the minimum mental and physical capacities persons must possess if they are to be properly ascribed liability responsibility. The latter refers instead to the duty to answer or rebut “accusations or charges which, if established, carry liability to punishment or blame or other adverse treatment” (Hart 1968, 213). For Hart, liability is the “primary meaning” of responsibility.

In Hart’s view, these three types of responsibility (liability, causality, capacity) are mostly linked to the retrospective assignment of responsibility, whereas the idea of role-responsibility, though connected with them, is mostly forward-looking (Gorgoni 2010, 2011), related to the responsibility a person takes. In Hart’s words, role-responsibility applies

whenever a person occupies a distinctive place or office in a social organization, to which specific duties are attached to provide for the welfare of others or to advance in some specific way the aims or purposes of the organization, [and] he is properly said to be responsible for the performance of these duties, or for doing what is necessary to fulfill them. Such duties are a person’s responsibilities. (Hart 1968, 212)

Like Vincent, other scholars have engaged in this definitional work and introduced further distinctions (see, for example, Davis 2012). In general, we can say that these nuanced definitions and the exploration of their connections are aimed primarily at defining the conditions for *ascription*, as a judgement of attribution to someone, as to its actual author, of an action and its consequences, and for *subjection*, an obligation to put things right or to suffer the penalty for the results of a blameworthy action. This effort is most clear in the work of Vincent we have cited, in which the author describes the “justificatory relations” linking the six meanings of responsibility she identified:

8 Capacity usually refers to the capacity to understand what is required, to deliberate and decide what to do, and to control one’s own conduct in light of such decisions (cf. Hart 1968, 218). In sum, it basically refers to knowledge, control, and (free) will.

(1) [...] claims about outcome responsibility are derived from claims about causal and role responsibility, (2) [...] claims about capacity responsibility bear on claims about causal and role responsibility, and (3) [...] claims about liability responsibility are derived from claims about outcome and virtue responsibility. (Vincent 2011, 19)

Firstly, Vincent explains that responsibility for some outcome is ascribed to an agent if her actions actually contributed to the said outcome and, in doing so, she violated her role responsibility in acting like that. Secondly, Vincent claims that “in determining what responsibilities a person has [in either causal or role terms] we should, among other things, consider what capacity they (ought to) possess” (Vincent 2011, 23). This means that capacity regulates duties. “People with greater capacities are usually expected to conform to higher standards”, but, also, “incapacities can excuse departure” from those standards: if I can swim, I have the duty to save a child drowning; if I cannot, then I would not be blameworthy if I do not save her. Thirdly, according to Vincent, liability responsibility seems to be affected by claims about outcome responsibility and virtue responsibility: punishment is, for instance, imposed on individuals who are established to be outcome responsible and the harshness of their punishment can be mitigated (or increased) by consideration of virtue responsibility (consider, for example, recidivism in criminal law).

The important lesson we take from this digression in “conceptual semantics” does not concern the differences between these classifications, but what they have in common, i.e. the reference to the two core dimensions of ascription and subjection. This choice is motivated by the direction of our investigation, which differs from these authoritative references. We are not interested in exploring the meanings and conditions of ascription and subjection *per se*, but in understanding how they are articulated in social processes, as “modes of enactment” of responsibility. Not in what makes a person responsible, but in what people think makes somebody responsible and how. Paraphrasing Ricoeur, we are more interested in “social semantics” rather than “conceptual semantics”. To start this enquiry, we need to examine what the basic elements are in any judgement of responsibility for both ascription and subjection. In addition, a third mode (assumption) will be introduced, which tries to capture the proactive element emphasised by the notion of role responsibility. However, before going back to observe the vicissitudes of Captain Smith to explore these aspects, we briefly comment on how responsibility has been dealt with in sociology.

2.2 Responsibility from Semantics to Social Processes

As we have briefly said in the introduction, responsibility has a peculiar destiny in sociology, where it rarely emerges as such. In one of the rare attempts to deal ‘head on’ with responsibility from a sociological perspective, Piet Strydom (1999) provides a concise but useful review of the concept in sociology. On the one hand, sociological thought has traditionally defined the notion of responsibility in individual terms within informal and pre-institutional (such as friendship, family, kinship) or institutional contexts (such as occupational roles). In both cases, responsibilities are defined and assigned “within the normative confines” of given pre-institutional or institutional conventions (Strydom 1999, 68). Classical notions like Émile Durkheim’s social division of labour or Talcott Parsons’s view of responsibility as a set of duties associated with status and roles are in line with this traditional view of responsibility. On the other hand, Strydom identifies a post-traditional, but still individual, notion of responsibility, which refers to individuals as they possess

special knowledge, abilities, judgement, power or influence in particular domains of social life, [and rather than] observing, traditional or conventional limits [...] take the initiative to shift the boundaries by assuming individual responsibility for the (re)design and (re)organization of institutions and social systems themselves with a view to the constant monitoring and the reduction or avoidance of negative features and effects. (Strydom 1999, 68–9)

In Strydom’s opinion, public intellectuals or prominent individuals challenging established conventions exemplify this post-traditional category of responsibility.⁹

Closely following Karl Otto Apel’s view of modern science and technology, Strydom criticises both sociological approaches to responsibility on the ground that the centrality of the individual agent they presume makes them inadequate when confronted by the collective nature of science-based technology, which instead needs a similarly collective concept of responsibility. As an alternative option, Strydom proposes the concept of frame to translate this ‘new conception’ of responsibility into sociological terms.¹⁰ Frames constitute discursive structures coordinating responsibility in society. For Strydom,

9 It is difficult to neatly include Max Weber in both groups. Interestingly, his work is not discussed in Strydom’s article.

10 The non-exclusivity of responsibility implies that the fact that one person is responsible (for something) “does not mean that other people are not equally responsible” (Ladd 1982, 9). The notion of coordination by way of framing which Strydom proposes, in our view, allows considering both, individual and collective responsibility as complementary. However, the author strongly emphasises the latter and the relation between the two

today, the responsibility frame occupies the central place vacated by rights and justice [...]. It amounts to the assumption that everyone is required to assume the same responsibility and, hence, that the responsibility frame is a comprehensively determining or constraining structure. (Strydom 1999, 76–77)

In other words, Strydom considers responsibility as a “master frame” of contemporary society. His view has the merit of making responsibility a prominent object of sociological reflection, but his work appears to fall short when the tension highlighted by Ricoeur between the assignment of responsibility for the consequences of action on the one hand, and the shared but depersonalised solidarity on the other, is considered (the latter is recalled by Strydom’s collective responsibility for the risks engendered by modern science and technology). From our perspective centred on social processes, an analysis of responsibility must therefore examine the ways it is organised in our contemporary technology-infused society, as a collective endeavour and obligation but also as a set of judgements about responsibility assignments.

To move in this direction, we can go back to the short story about Captain Smith we cited in section 2.1. While we have briefly commented on the several meanings of responsibility the story highlights, we observe here that the same elements are implicitly or explicitly mentioned throughout the reading as representing the components of the judgements about responsibility these meanings entail: (1) an agent (Captain Smith and, as regards the compensations to victims’ relatives, Captain Smith’s employer); (2) events and/or actions that can be ascribed to this agent (the ship’s loss, the victims, and Smith’s binge and misconduct); (3) a set of criteria against which a link between events and Smith’s antecedent behaviour (the medical and psychological evidence of Smith’s conditions, his “moral standing”) or between events and Smith’s future obligations (the legal rules defining Smith’s liability or the existence of insurance coverage) is established; (4) a concerned party assessing the connections (the attorney, the medical experts, those who knew Smith before the accident as an “exceedingly responsible person”).

Abstracting from Captain Smith’s vicissitudes, we can therefore identify four essential elements for a discussion on responsibility: (1) one or more agents; (2) events, actions or behaviours that can be ascribed to these agents; (3) a set of criteria against which the connection between such events, actions or behaviours and their consequences can be assessed (legal, moral, social, etc.); (4) an assessor (an

aspects is undetermined to a large extent. The heuristic framework elaborated in this book attempts to consider and combine both dimensions.

observer, the actors concerned by the consequences, the agent herself, etc.) that can assess and establish such a connection according to these criteria¹¹ (Fig. 2.1).

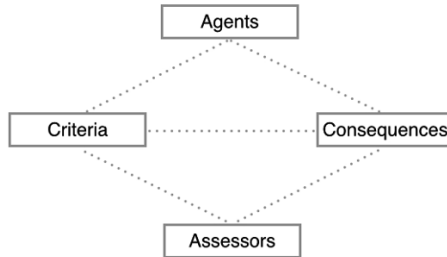


Fig. 2.1 Essential elements of judgements about responsibility

This understanding of the essential elements of responsibility closely resembles the “triangle of responsibility” framework proposed by Barry Schlenker and his colleagues (1994). These authors maintain that the following elements are essential in all judgments about responsibility: “(a) the prescriptions that should be guiding the actor’s conduct on the occasion, (b) the event that occurred (or is anticipated) that is relevant to the prescriptions, and (c) a set of identity images that are relevant to the event and prescriptions and that describe the actor’s roles, qualities, convictions, and aspirations”. Apart from the different wording, the variation between the “triangle” elaborated by Schlenker and his co-authors and the scheme in Figure 2.1 is related to the explicit mention of the presence of an assessor in the latter, which is left implicit in the work of Schlenker and his colleagues. On this, we have decided to make this element explicit, as we want to point out that there is no need for an *external* assessor to judge responsibility. The connection between action/events, assessment criteria and agents can be performed by the agent itself, for example by judging retrospectively her own behaviour or prospectively its

11 In a similar way, Armin Grunwald (2014) proposes a “four place reconstruction” of responsibility that includes the following basic aspects: (1) someone assumes responsibility or is made responsible (responsibility is assigned to her/him) for (2) something such as the results of actions or decisions relative to (3) rules and criteria which orientate responsible from less responsible or irresponsible action, and relative to the (4) knowledge available about the impacts and consequences of the action or decision under consideration, including also meta-knowledge about the epistemological status of that knowledge and uncertainties involved.

future consequences (see also below in this section), or the actors who are directly concerned by the behaviour of the former, such as those who suffer or benefit from these consequences. In other words, assessors can be fully part of the social processes responsibility concerns.

The work of Schlenker and his co-authors is also important, however, with regard to another aspect: the acknowledgement that, upon close inspection, the assessment of responsibility concerns different objects and criteria. Indeed, if we look at what these authors call “identity images”, which correspond to our more generic “assessment criteria”, we see that they are twofold. They refer to the agent’s capacity to control or direct events and constitute therefore the criteria against which the actor-event link is established in causal terms. At the same time, they establish the link between the actor and prescriptions and represent therefore the criteria against which the actor-prescription link is established in terms of normative indications of actors’ conduct. It is on the basis of this dual characterisation that we can rescue the distinction between ascription and subjection and bring it into our analysis of responsibility in social processes. The actor-event link regards imputability, which concerns judgements about facts. The actor-prescription link concerns answerability, which in turn regards (the breach of) rules and/or the agent’s motivations in breaking those rules. As a consequence, responsibility concerns imputability, when it refers to “the possibility of tracing an action back to an agent as its causal factor” (Pellizzoni 2003, 546). Responsibility instead concerns answerability, which is not connected with causes, but with the search for reasons, when it regards “explanations of motives lying behind one’s behaviour”. This second aspect

emphasises the presence of moral or legal rules specifying rights and obligations. These norms impinge on the evaluation of the effects of an action, as in self-defence, and can make someone answerable for someone else’s action, as when parents are held legally liable for the conduct of their children. (Pellizzoni 2003, 547)

Imputability and answerability are intertwined, but not coincident. Parents may be held responsible (answerability) for the consequences of their children’s behaviour (imputability); employers may be held responsible (answerability) for the consequences of their employee’s behaviour (imputability). In this case, there may be no direct responsibility for either the parents or the employer, but they can be held liable notwithstanding the absence of any direct involvement in the chain of actions leading to the state of affairs for which they are held responsible. Imputability is the condition of *ascription*. Imputability and answerability together define the conditions of *subjection* and, consequently, the obligation to repair and/or the suffering of blame or adverse treatment, that is central in the notion of liability (cf. Hart 1968).

This distinction has the merit of being applicable to both forward-looking responsibility (“responsibility ascription in order to prevent bad things to happen, prospective responsibility”) and backward-looking responsibility (“responsibility ascribed after something bad has happened, retrospective responsibility”) (the two quoted definitions are from Coeckelbergh 2011, 38). In other words, I (the concerned party or the observer) can expect that an actor has an obligation (the prescriptions) to behave in a way (the identity) that prevents bad things happening (events). I (the concerned party or the observer) can also ascertain that an actor failed to respect her obligation (the prescriptions) to behave in a way (the identity) that could have prevented bad things happening (events). The same applies when credit and not blame is concerned.¹²

Both imputability and answerability imply the assessment of the behaviour of an agent, made by another agent or by an observer. We can however detect a third mode in which responsibility is enacted in social processes: *assumption*. Assumption captures the active dimension of responsibility, and it is referred to by the meanings of role-responsibility in Hart or Vincent’s accounts, or by the concept of solidarity in Ricoeur’s work. Assumption is, in different terms, elicited when the point of view of the agent herself is taken instead of that of an assessor, be it a concerned party or an observer. In the parlance of Schlenker and his colleagues, assumption refers to the self-assessment by agents themselves of the links between prescriptions, events, and (self)identity images, with a view of their own behaviour and control over events.

This distinction of assumption, ascription and subjection provides an answer to the lack of qualification of the notion of responsibility we noticed in Strydom’s work. This conceptual clarification takes the point of view of social processes and distinguishes the “modes of enactment” of responsibility in the relations between the agent, the parties concerned by her action, and (possibly) an observer. On the one hand, assumption refers to the relation between the agent and those who are concerned by the events she knows, or better she believes to know, as an outcome of her action(s). On the other hand, ascription and subjection concern the relation between the agent, her behaviour and an assessor, which can be either an external observer or a concerned party. These “modes of enactment” of responsibility are

12 Responsibility and its modes of ascription and subjection are most often characterised in a negative sense. From the logical point of view, however, somebody can be responsible not only for blameworthy actions, but also for praiseworthy ones. Other literature (Davis 2012) explicitly adds “good-causation” among the meanings of responsibility, which refers to the positive consequences of action (such as “she is responsible for our success”).

consistent with the general characteristic of responsibility we identified in our etymological discussion: responsibility is always oriented to somebody or something.

The following sections will address the orientation of responsibility to the other(s) moving from a review of Max Weber's definition of responsibility and of the links this notion has with two other concepts explored in the work of the German sociologist: social action and social relationship. From this starting point, we will then analyse the ways responsibility (in science and technology) is organised in our contemporary technology-infused society, thus attempting to solve the tension we recognized in Strydom's work between ascription/subjection on the one hand and the assumption of responsibility for the risks engendered by modern science and technology on the other.

2.3 The Consequences of Action: Responsibility and Ethics in Max Weber

As we have said, our analysis begins with Max Weber's perspective on responsibility. Though a thorough historical reconstruction and critical assessment of the genesis, development and place of this concept in Max Weber's work is beyond the scope of the book, it is nevertheless necessary to present its main aspects in some detail.

Weber discussed the issue of responsibility primarily in two different contexts: his analysis of politics as a "vocation" (Weber 1946a) and his examination of the economic ethics of world religions (see his "Intermediate reflections", cf. Weber 1946b). In "Politics as a vocation", the German sociologist considers the "personal conditions" (Weber 1946a, 115) of politicians. Among these conditions, he lists "three pre-eminent qualities", by which politicians can "hope to do justice to [their] power [and] to do justice to the responsibility that power imposes" upon them (Weber 1946a, 115). The first quality is "passion", the "passionate devotion to a 'cause'", which makes this cause "the guiding star of action". The second one is the "sense of proportion", "the trained relentlessness in viewing the realities of life, and the ability to face such realities and to measure up to them inwardly" (Weber 1946a, 126–127). Instead of passion, here calculation rules. The third quality is responsibility: how politicians respond to the consequences of their action, i.e. of the use of power, which is the proper mean of politics.

With regard to the relation between political action and its consequences, politicians can be guided by two different types of ethics. The first one is the "ethic of conviction". It justifies actions as long as they are consistent with a set of values the politician considers as universally valid.

The world of [those who follow the ethic of conviction] is a unity, an ultimately ethical rational cosmos. Human responsibility begins and ends in the location of the key to this rational order, or at least in the discernment of its basic contours, and in the regulation of conduct in accordance with this order. This order is presupposed, even where it is only partially discernible. Moral guidance is to be sought and found in an overarching rationality in which values are given their proper location in the unity of things (Starr 2006, 425).

The ethic of conviction is an “absolute ethic” of unconditional duties, with no concern for the consequences of action. “[I]n religious terms,” – Weber says – “the Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord” (Weber 1946a, 120). This ethic of unconditional passion for the “cause” has two implications: (1) actions are seen as “examples”, they are aimed at restating the justness of the cause rather than effectively achieving the ends set by the cause; (2) actors do not take into account the specific characteristics of the typical means of politics (power) that can contradict the cosmos of values according to which actions are assessed (the problem of using unjust means to achieve just ends).

The ethic of responsibility is instead the ethic of the rational and sober calculation of the consequences of (political) action. According to this ethic, “one has to give account of the foreseeable results of one’s action” (Weber 1946a, 120) and, conversely, to consider proactively the consequences of one’s actions, the anticipation and assessment of which become the moral criteria for deciding whether an action is to be undertaken or not. The ethic of responsibility implies the willingness to assign the responsibility for actions to the agent herself and to her free and voluntary choices instead of the moral imperative “by which [the agent] lets herself be guided” (Volonté 2000, 14). The ethic of responsibility is Weber’s answer to the moral pluralism that characterises modernity. This pluralism challenges the very idea of an ordered cosmos of values that founds the ethic of conviction. Weber is aware that modernity is instead characterised by the inevitable conflict of values and value spheres (which means that the order of values is subjectively determined in concrete situations and that different orders of value have subjective and intersubjective validity in different institutional spheres of social life, such as the family, economy, and culture).¹³

13 The ethics of conviction and responsibility are respectively deontological and consequentialist in essence. As we will see later on, Weber’s ethical project cannot be reduced to either of these two, and so cannot be his view of responsibility. Weber’s work “culminates in an ethical characterology or philosophical anthropology in which passion and reason are properly ordered by sheer force of individual volition. In this light, Weber’s political virtue resides not simply in a subjective intensity of value commitment nor in a detached intellectual integrity, but in their willful combination in a unified soul” (Kim 2012).

For Weber, however, passion and calculation alone equally fail to make a “politician who is true to his calling” (Weber 1946a, 127). Passion for a cause without a sense of proportion “intoxicates” with purely “romantic sensations” (Weber 1946a, 127). Calculation without passion and the faith in a cause resolves itself into pure expediency and makes it “absolutely true that the curse of the creature’s worthlessness overshadows even the externally strongest political successes” (Weber 1946a, 117). The lack of a cause and detachment paves the way to vanity, so that power becomes “purely personal self-intoxication” (Weber 1946a, 116). Therefore ethics in politics must include passion and calculation, conviction and responsibility. They are “supplements” to each other (Weber 1946a, 127).

Yet, Weber affirms strongly: “[w]e must be clear about the fact that all ethically oriented conduct may be guided by one of two fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims: conduct can be oriented to an ‘ethic of ultimate ends’ or to an ‘ethic of responsibility.’ [...] There is an abysmal contrast between [the two]” (Weber 1946a, 120). However, though these two “worldviews” are considered “conceptually” or “theoretically” opposite (Starr 2006), they can be reconciled on a practical ground. “Weber does not resolve this problem on the level of theory [...]. But he does resolve the clash of worldviews, of gods and demons, in a practical way, that is, a matter of political ethics” (Mittleman 2014, 287). His practical solution leaves the synthesis of these two ethics in the hands of the politician: the politician who is true to his calling, “is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere he reaches the point where he says: ‘Here I stand; I can do no other’” (Weber 1946a, 127, quoting Martin Luther). While we set aside considerations on the “heroic” character of this view of political ethics (Verstraten 1995, Mittleman 2014; see also Weber 1946a, 127–128), this passage and the overall logic of “Politics as a vocation” illustrate that both ethics concern the consequences of (political) action, though in a different way. The ethic of conviction is centred on conformity to (subjective) values; the ethic of responsibility is based on the (subjective) calculation of the congruity of means and ends. As Weber affirms in his essay on “Religious Rejection of the World and Its Directions” (Weber 1946b), where he first distinguishes between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of the attention to the consequences of action,

[t]he question is whether and to what extent the responsibility of the actor for the results sanctifies the means, or whether the value of the actor’s intention justifies him in rejecting the responsibility for the outcome, whether to pass on the results of the act to God or to the wickedness and foolishness of the world which are permitted by God. (Weber 1946b, 339)

2.4 Weber's Theory of Action and Responsibility: a Matter of Causes and Motivations

Relating Weber's two ethics to his theory of social action may further clarify why both are relevant to our discussion of responsibility. Our primary reference is the first part of Weber's "Economy and Society", where he discusses the concept of social action and develops his well-known typology.

The typology distinguishes four ways in which action can be oriented. According to Weber, social action can be: (1) instrumentally rational, "that is, determined by expectations as to the behaviour of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as 'conditions' or 'means' for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends"; (2) value-rational, "that is, determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success"; (3) affectual, "that is, determined by the actor's specific affects and feeling states"; (4) traditional, "that is, determined by ingrained habituation" (Weber 1978, 24–25).

In exploring ethics, Weber, and we follow his perspective, considers only the two types of rational orientations, as an aspect of the universal historical process of rationalisation affecting morality as well (Weber 1946b; see also Ferrara 2005, Volonté 2000). When looking at value and instrumental rationality, value-rational action is exemplified by "the actions of persons who, regardless of possible costs to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions" (Weber 1978, 25). With a terminology that is strikingly similar to the one he uses in "Politics as a vocation", Weber says that "value-rational action always involves 'commands' or 'demands' which, in the actor's opinion, are binding to him" and are justified "by the importance of some 'cause' no matter in what it consists" (Weber 1978, 25). Consequences, strategies and means-ends assessments are not ruled out in value-rational action, yet they are subordinate to the internal necessity of the action that is granted by the value system the actors comply with. Action is here performed to reproduce the subjective values of the actor. Instrumentally rational action requires instead that "the end, the means, and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighted. This involves rational consideration of alternative means to the end, of the relations of the end to the secondary consequences, and finally of the relative importance of different possible ends" (Weber 1978, 26).

Looking at responsibility from the point of view of social action, we can say that instrumentally rational action is translated in the ethic of responsibility, while value-rational action characterises the ethic of conviction. The pragmatic mastering of political responsibility in terms of both ethics of conviction and of responsibility

involves therefore the combination (to various degrees) of instrumentally rational and value-rational actions (Starr 2006). Although the common emphasis on the instrumental assessment of actions and their consequences in both instrumentally rational action and in the ethic of responsibility can be seen as if Weber equates responsibility and instrumentally rational action, this view contradicts two characteristics of responsibility as laid out by the German sociologist. Firstly, Weber emphasises the “hybridity” of the practical conciliation of the two ethical perspectives described in “Politics as a vocation” in his view of political responsibility. Secondly, Weber clearly recognises that scientific rationality and rational calculation cannot answer questions regarding “the value of culture and its individual contents and the question of how [we] should act in the cultural community and in political associations” or other “practical and interested stands”, “in principle because the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other” (Weber 1946c, 147–148). In other words, instrumental rationality cannot be a measure of values, just as, the other way round, aesthetic and moral values cannot be a measure for instrumental rationality, and these two rational orientations of actions, and the related ethical options, rather limit each other (Starr 2006).

Despite this contrast, these two types of action orientation can further our discussion of responsibility if what they share is considered: they refer to social action. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, Weber defines action as an individual behaviour to which a subjective meaning is attached by the acting individual, “be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence” (Weber 1978, 4). We have already said that both types of rational actions deal with consequences: all actions produce consequences, they start or are part of causal chains and therefore they can be interpreted causally insofar as such an interpretation “would concern the statistical probability that, according to verified generalizations from experience, a sequence of events will always actually occur in the same way” (Weber 1978, 11). In addition, both types of rational actions, insofar as they are social actions, share a second characteristic dimension: a subjective meaning is attached to them. “We understand in terms of motive the meaning that an actor attaches to [an action], in that we understand what makes him do this at precisely this moment and in these circumstances” (Weber 1978, 8). From this second point of view, what distinguishes the instrumentally rational and the value-rational action is their distinct meaning, which describes two different relationships between action and their consequences.¹⁴

14 It is important to note that the rationality of action is, in Weber's typology, entirely confined to the subjective level of actor's motivations and thus it does not imply any judgement by an observer to assess an *objective* type of rationality to which actions either conform or not (the “norm” of the first typology of action elaborated by Weber in 1913

The combination of instrumentally rational and value-rational considerations that is mastered by the figure of the charismatic political leader of “Politics as a vocation” is generalised in Weber’s discussion of economic action in “Economy and society”. There, he distinguishes between “formal rationality [...] to designate the extent of quantitative calculation or accounting which is technically possible and which is actually applied” and “substantive rationality [which is] the degree to which the provisioning of given groups of persons (no matter how delimited) with goods is shaped by economically oriented social action under some criterion (past, present, or potential) of ultimate values (*wertende Postulate*), regardless of the nature of these ends” (Weber 1978, 85). The latter

conveys only one element [...]: namely, that they do not restrict themselves to note the purely formal and (relatively) unambiguous fact that action is based on “goal-oriented” rational calculation with the technically most adequate available methods, but apply certain criteria of ultimate ends, whether they be ethical, political, utilitarian, hedonistic, feudal (*ständisch*), egalitarian, or whatever, and measure the results of the economic action, however formally “rational” in the sense of correct calculation they may be, against these scales of “value rationality” or “substantive goal rationality”. (Weber 1978, 85–86; see also Habermas 1984, 170–172)¹⁵

in “Some categories of comprehensive sociology” and later modified in “Economy and Society”. For a discussion, see Pellizzoni, 1996). In Weber’s own words, “[a] subjectively ‘rational’ action is not identical with a rationally ‘correct’ action, i.e., one which uses the objectively correct means in accord with scientific knowledge. Rather, it means only that the subjective intention of the individual is planfully directed to the means which are regarded as correct for a given end. Thus a progressive subjective rationalization of conduct is not necessarily the same as progress in the direction of rationally or technically ‘correct’ behaviour.” (Weber 1949, 34).

- 15 The pragmatic mastering of instrumental action and value-rational action in both politics and economic action is indicative of the framing of instrumentally rational action in a voluntaristic theory of action, which is exactly Weber’s contribution to overcome the positivistic position, in the more explicit form in its “utilitarian” fashion, that “left the character of ends on the whole uninvestigated”, and “it was forced to the assumption that ends were random relative to the positivistically determinate elements of action” (Parsons 1949, 699). Nonetheless, this “decisionism” – individuals choose and commit themselves to values which are not grounded in absolute underpinnings, as a consequence of the “polytheism of values” deriving from the development of different and incommensurable value spheres (see Turner and Factor 2006) – has prompted a debate on the individualistic perspective that underlies it. For instance, Jürgen Habermas has attempted to overcome the perceived limitation of this perspective by arguing that the commensurability of the different spheres can rest on the “argumentative redemption of validity claims” at the procedural level (Habermas 1984, 249). Parsons has emphasised instead that the conformity to intersubjective evaluative standards prevails, by

In the context of this book, the important lesson we take from Weber is that responsibility is a matter of meaningful actions, their consequences, and their appraisal. From the point of view of Weber's theory of action, responsibility can be seen as a combination of instrumentally rational and value-rational actions, which are social, in Weber's sense, because they are oriented, in terms of causal consequences and meanings, to the behaviour of others. The meanings of action are related to their motivations, based on a variable combination of subjective goals and values (for example: I behave in a way that is consistent with the anticipation that others can hold me responsible for the consequences of my actions or I assess the consequences of my action according to the conformity to an orderly cosmos of values of some subjective validity). As Volonté notices,

[a]ccepting the consequences of action – behaving "responsibly" – means the acknowledgement that the value guiding our action may not be recognised by the others and that it may not be accepted as a universal value. Therefore, we have to assume the responsibility of having set [this value] as a guide of our action when other people are concerned. (Volonté 2001, 62)

The next section examines the implications of this twofold characterisation of responsible action, in terms of consequences and of motivations, for the "modes of enactment" of responsibility we have described above in section 2.2.

2.5 Responsibility: 'Modes of Enactment' and the Implications of Weber's Theory of Action

Placing responsibility under the umbrella of social action (i.e. action oriented to the behaviour of others) translates in sociological terms the "orientation to others" that the etymology of the word "responsibility" suggests and which implies that one is always responsible towards somebody. In addition, the reference to Max Weber's notion of social action is helpful to identify two distinct yet complementary dimensions incorporated into the modes of enactment of responsibility we have distinguished (assumption, ascription, subjection): causes and motivations. The orientation by the future consequences of actions resonates in the notion of assumption. Causal explanations for actions and the search of empirical regularities recall the idea of imputability and ascription. Motivations and meanings point instead to

means of internalisation and sanctions, on the purely individual orientation of action to self-interest (Parsons 1977, 37–38).

answerability and subjection. Regarding the latter, the two types of rational action (instrumentally rational and value-rational action) defined by Weber provide a simple yet powerful guide to examine and assess the meaningful linkages actors establish between actions and the consequences they take responsibility or are held responsible for, beyond merely causal connections.

Recalling the descriptions we introduced in sections 2.1 and 2.2, we can rephrase them on the basis of the elements we have derived from our discussion of Weber's work on responsibility and social action (the orientation to the behaviour of others in terms of consequences and meanings, the twofold characterisation of action's motivations). Adding these elements to the picture can thus enrich our description of the three modes in which responsibility is enacted in social processes (see Figure 2.2). Accordingly, we propose the following distinctions and definitions:

1. assumption, which involves the conscious (rational) consideration of the consequences of one action, to which the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning, i.e. a motivated action by which a certain state of fact is caused;
2. ascription, which involves the tracking of a (causal) chain of events and actions back to the acting individual who has caused a certain state of fact by way of a motivated action and the discernment of the motivations behind actions by an observer or by others to whom actions are directed;
3. subjection, which involves both the duty of the acting individuals to answer and the related right to ask of others who are concerned by the action (i.e. those to whom the action is oriented). Like ascription, subjection implies the (actual or anticipated) occurrence of consequences and the (subjective) possibility to discern the motivations behind actions.

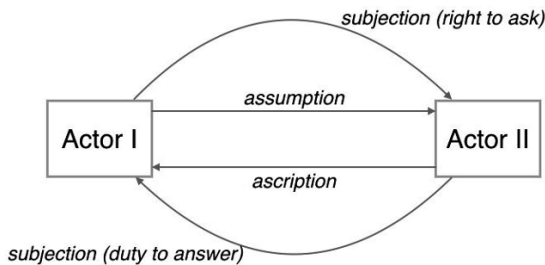


Fig. 2.2 Responsibility and its three “modes of enactment” in social processes

The notion of ascription resonates in Weber's use of the term "imputation" (see, for example, Weber 1946a, 120–121).¹⁶ Subjection refers to the duty to give an account of the results of one's action and is close to the (legal) meaning of "liability" which Weber introduces in his discussion of the features of the patrimonial State (Weber 1978, 1023). As we have said in the previous section, ascription can be oriented to the past behaviour of others (I can trace back the present consequences to a past behaviour), but can also concern the anticipated causal chains following present or future behaviour (I can link future consequences to a future, hypothetical behaviour). Subjection describes instead a circular movement from the acting subject to the one who is concerned (affected) by the consequences of this action and *vice versa*. Assumption, as specified above, is inherently future-oriented. When motivations are considered, instrumentally rational and value-rational considerations define different meaningful relations between actions and consequences in all three of these forms of responsibility. One can, for example, assume a responsibility by virtue of self-interest, or compliance to an ordered set of values, and the same discernment can be applied to ascription and subjection.

While these three modes of responsibility can stand alone conceptually, social processes combine them in various ways (ascription can, for example, follow assumption, subjection can follow ascription or assumption), and this can happen in different periods of time and concerning different, but related, objects. For instance, an actor assuming responsibility for something considers the behaviour of those concerned by the consequences of her actions; those concerned (or affected) can in turn orient their actions (in terms of ascription and subjection) to the behaviour of the actor. And when an actor is indirectly responsible for the consequences of the actions of a third subject, she can assume responsibility for the latter and assumption stems from the subjection to the duty to answer for that. The actor that suffers from the consequences of these actions can ascribe responsibility to the acting individual, but ask the other actor to answer with regard to the related consequences (subjection).

This example suggests that both, the actors and those concerned by the consequences of an action are (or can be) a plurality. For instance, a local community (or a plurality of actors in a local community) can ascribe an industrial company to have failed to take responsibility for protecting the local environment in its

16 Weber briefly discusses the problem of imputation with reference to a collective setting in "Economy and Society" (Weber 1978, 46–48): on the one hand there are situations in which "certain kinds of action of each participant may be imputed to all others, in which case we speak of 'mutually responsible members', on the other hand the actions of certain members (the 'representatives') may be attributed to the others (the 'represented')" (Weber 1978, 46–47). We will briefly come back to this point in the closing chapter.

operations. The community can ask the company to resolve the matter or to be subjected to blame or adverse treatment (for example a protest, a boycott, or a fine), but it can also ascribe responsibility to, for instance, oversight authorities and question them because they are believed to have failed in their responsibility to protect the community.

The authorities in turn can ascertain if the company failed to assume its responsibility to the community or the public authority itself and ask the company to address the problem. The picture can be further enriched exploring the multiple relations and allegiances that these three (collective) actors have with other social groups or organisations, such as media outlets (Fig. 2.3).

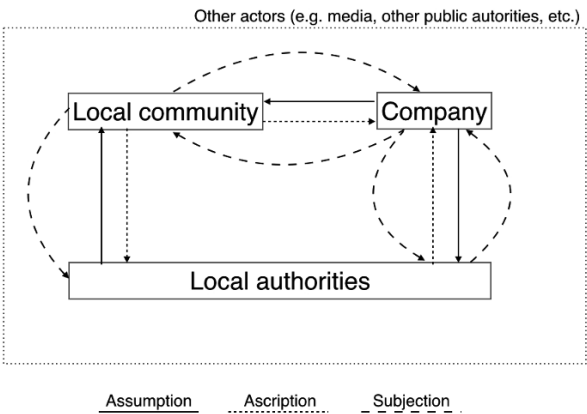


Fig. 2.3 The “modes of enactment” of responsibility in a plural setting

This reciprocal orientation of action complies with the features Weber assigns to social relations. In Weber’s terms, a social relation denotes “the behaviour of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of others and is oriented in these terms” (Weber 1978, 26). While conceptually these three modes of enactment can stand alone, they are combined in social processes as parts of broader responsibility relations.

The mutual orientation of responsibility’s modes of enactment also has a consequence for the essential elements of responsibility judgements we identified in section 2.2. In this context, the link between actors, their actions and consequences can be assessed by a concerned party, i.e. one who suffers from the effect of an action, or by other actors who are not affected. We have called this latter actor an

"observer", in order to emphasise that responsibility can be judged at a distance from the interaction and from the reciprocal orientation of actions. Yet, if we are faithful to Weber's understanding of social action and social relations, the distance between the observer and the actors is reduced or annulled, as the very enactment of responsibility, in whichever mode, implies the orientation of the third party's behaviour to that of the actors. Moreover, insofar as their behaviour takes account of third party actions, a social relation is established, which is new with respect to the first one which the third party has assessed, but which nevertheless binds the three actors together. From a purely logical point of view, this sequence can, of course, be repeated indefinitely.

As a consequence of this definition of social relationships, we can infer that the mutual orientation of the three modes of enactment constitutes what may be called a "responsibility relation". However, this reciprocal orientation of action does not mean that all actions have the same meaning for all the concerned actors, but that the meaningful, mutual orientation of actions is the condition for a relation to be established, including when it concerns responsibility. The following chapter explores the possibility of this reciprocal orientation of action, by introducing the notion of 'expectations'.

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Arnaldi, S.; Bianchi, L.

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