Moral responsibility at the limits of awareness
van Dommelen, Wessel

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Moral Responsibility at the Limits of Awareness

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the University of Groningen on the authority of the Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga and in accordance with the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on Thursday 3 November 2022 at 16.15 hours

by

Wessel Rutger van Dommelen

born on 6 August 1990 in Veghel
Supervisors
Prof. F.A. Hindriks
Prof. P. Kleingeld

Assessment Committee
Prof. B. Streumer
Prof. A.W. Musschenga
Prof. M.M.S.K. Sie
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An interesting feature of philosophical discussion of moral responsibility is that it mostly tends to be about its negative side: resentment, anger and blame. This dissertation is no exception to this general rule, but I can at least start with moral responsibility’s positive side: with praise and gratitude for those without whom this project would not have been possible.

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Introduction

Moral responsibility is usually a silent partner in everyday social life. If nothing morally significant happens, there is no reason to praise or blame, and no reason for guilt. Only when something morally significant occurs does moral responsibility come to the fore. A show of ill will or blatant disregard can easily start the blame game. Anyone who is normatively proficient can participate in it. The blame game appears to be a necessary part of social life, but it is a hard game to play right, and perhaps even harder to understand.

Moral responsibility is a rich philosophical discipline, not only because responsibility is important for social interaction, but also because it has a high degree of complexity. There is little in the study of moral responsibility on which philosophers agree, while the potential for disagreement is vast. Are agents only responsible for actions, or also for omissions and thoughts? Must an agent be aware of the wrongness of her action in order to be blameworthy, and if so, to what extent? And what does moral responsibility even entail? Is moral responsibility mostly about the deserved consequences of some action, or is it more about the breaking and mending of relationships between individuals?

One take on moral responsibility has been particularly influential. This is the view that moral responsibility ascriptions are based on the reactions people have to displays of another’s quality of will. Treat someone with ill will or indifference, and they will resent you for it. Treat someone with good will, and they will respond with gratitude. A display of quality of will has a matching reactive attitude, which is an expression of praise or blame. This framework of a quality of will and corresponding reactive attitudes, described by Peter Strawson in 1962, is still quite popular today.

One of the bigger questions involving the “quality of will” conception of moral responsibility is whether it is necessary to be conscious of the moral significance of your action in order to express quality of will. Can you express ill will even if you were not aware of stepping on someone’s toes? The answer would seem to be no, since that would be an accidental occurrence and thus
unintended. At the same time, stepping on someone’s toes could be a sign of indifference. Perhaps you did not take proper care to avoid the other’s feet. If agents are morally responsible for such mistakes, this puts strain on the fairly common thought that awareness of the moral significance of your actions is required for moral responsibility.

Because it is such a multi-faceted phenomenon, any discussion of moral responsibility must focus on some aspects while leaving out many others. One of the factors that is often set aside is that wrongs and blameworthiness are extended in time. A wrong is mostly analyzed as an action at a particular moment, one that renders the person blameworthy at that time. If I purposely cut the line in the supermarket, for instance, this is a single event for which I am morally responsible. However, wrongs and the accompanying blameworthiness are rarely if ever momentary events. Even cutting in line is a temporally extended event that begins as I start to gently ease into the queue and ends when I make my payment. The event is also preceded by intentions and thoughts and followed by feelings of guilt, regret or a false sense of victory and superiority over those law-abiding queue fanatics. Wrongs take time to commit, blame might not be attributed immediately, and it may cease to be appropriate after some time has passed. Time actually plays a double role with respect to the relation between consciousness and quality of will. Not only does it matter whether actions are premeditated, but it also seems that conscious choices often have an indirect effect on our future quality of will. Learned behavior might not be performed in full conscious awareness of its moral significance, but it is learned from past conscious actions.

My aim in this dissertation is to contribute to the debates on moral responsibility by focusing on these two themes: time and awareness. I will do so by focusing on cases at the margins, where agents are not fully aware of the moral significance of their actions. The cases I discuss involve intoxication, forgetfulness, habits, and implicit attitudes. Such cases challenge the notion that relevant awareness is required for moral responsibility, since they present scenarios where agents at least appear to be morally responsible.
even though they lack concurrent awareness of the moral significance of their behavior. As I will argue, these challenges strain the relation between awareness and quality of will, but we do not need to drop the awareness condition on moral responsibility altogether. In reworking the connection between awareness and quality of will, we will gain insight into some of the temporal dimensions of moral responsibility – insight which is crucial to making sense of the dynamic processes of moral responsibility.

The quality of a person’s will is not set in stone. Someone who treated you with ill will in the past can improve his attitude over the years, and vice versa – someone with whom you were on good terms in the past can come to hold a grudge and act with ill will later on. The fluctuating nature of quality of will presents a hurdle for a clear analysis of the relation between quality of will and moral responsibility. Because of this, it is important to distinguish between synchronic and diachronic responsibility. Synchronic responsibility is responsibility at the time of action, which is unaffected by any changes an individual makes subsequently. Diachronic responsibility is responsibility for a past action, which may very well be affected by later changes undergone by the agent.

In addition to an introduction and a conclusion, this thesis consists of five chapters. In the first chapter, I will consider how changes to one’s quality of will can affect one’s diachronic responsibility. It seems that if a person improves over time, some reduction of responsibility may result. There is something appealing in the idea that positive change should be rewarded with a reduction of blame. At the same time, it also appears that mere improvement is not enough to evade blameworthiness altogether. Part of my argument will be that to explain these differences, we need to carefully distinguish between wrongs that are completely in the past and wrongs that are in a sense ongoing. For instance, you might have told a lie in the past, but the wrong may be ongoing as long as you do not come clean. I will argue that personal change affects synchronic responsibility for these ongoing wrongs but does not impact diachronic responsibility for wrongs committed in the
past. In the remaining chapters, I go on to focus on the temporal dimensions of synchronic responsibility.

I develop a way of reconciling the awareness condition with responsibility for cases such as habitual behavior in the second chapter. To the extent that exercises of habit are automatic, a strong awareness condition would seem to place them beyond the scope of moral responsibility. However, habit is the result of repeated conscious behavior, in which the relation between an agent’s behavior and quality of will becomes “hardwired” in the agent’s psychology. This established relation is in many cases sufficient for moral responsibility. In this chapter, I defend what I call “the historical consciousness thesis,” which tries to capture this relation between awareness and moral responsibility.

In the third chapter, I discuss a common strategy for reconciling the awareness condition with moral responsibility for behavior the agent is not aware of performing at the time. This strategy is known as “tracing,” that is, tracing responsibility for the behavior back to an earlier action. The idea is that we are indirectly responsible for our behavior if we could have foreseen and controlled our omission, habit, or intoxication at an earlier point in time. Tracing is often used in discussions of cases involving intoxication. If someone is intoxicated and fails to meet the conditions for moral responsibility, she may still be morally responsible in virtue of her earlier decision to drink. At the moment of her decision, she could have foreseen the possible future consequences of her drinking. I argue that there are at least two different readings of what tracing achieves. Most philosophers appear to hold that tracing means that agents are responsible for the quality of will shown while intoxicated. I argue that this form of tracing fails, while another interpretation may succeed. This other form of tracing holds that agents are responsible for their behavior while intoxicated as a consequence of their earlier behavior. The success of this other form of tracing depends on whether agents are responsible for the consequences of their behavior in any scenario.
The fourth chapter is dedicated to another challenge to the idea that awareness of the moral significance of one’s actions is necessary for moral responsibility: the fact that agents appear to be morally responsible for unwitting omissions. Even if one has acted unintentionally in forgetting a friend’s birthday, the omission may signal a lack of care, where care should have been present. Simply denying that such agents are morally responsible for such events is implausible, since agents often feel guilty for unwitting omissions and try to make up for them. However, if we wish to retain a tight connection between quality of will and awareness, we need to deny moral responsibility for unwitting omissions. In turn, this requires that we explain away the guilt and other reactions in cases involving such omissions. I will argue that we have a practice for dealing with cases like unwitting omissions that is closely related to moral responsibility. I call this practice “accident resolution.”

The final theme that I broach in this dissertation is the fact that agents are not consistently aware of all of the attitudes they harbor. Agents sometimes express attitudes they are not aware of or do not reflectively endorse. An older brother may treat his younger sister as a child long after she has entered adulthood without realizing it. Although he may quickly acknowledge his behavior when confronted by his sister, his behavior was not intended. The question is whether he is responsible for his attitude. Since there seem to be cases in which agents are morally responsible even when they are not reflectively aware of their attitudes, this seems to challenge the awareness condition. Furthermore, there seems to be a conflict between an agent’s consciously held attitudes and those attitudes that evade reflective awareness, which raises the question whether quality of will itself is conflicted. In the final chapter, I defend the view that in such cases, agents are not responsible for both attitudes simultaneously and that we associate only one of them with that person’s real self. This view may be taken to imply that
many attitudes are dissociated from one’s real self, but I argue that the view is less contentious than it first appears. The reason is that many supposed conflicts between attitudes disappear on closer inspection.

At first glance, awareness of the moral significance of one’s actions seems essential to moral responsibility for those actions. Yet many issues have been raised in recent decades that call the importance of awareness into doubt. In this dissertation, I argue that these challenges can be met. I show that awareness of the moral significance of one’s actions is important but that we need to refine our description of the role it plays in the formation of behavior, in particular by taking into consideration the various temporal dimensions of moral responsibility.