Moral responsibility at the limits of awareness

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6 Conclusion

The main question with which I began this dissertation is whether consciousness of the moral significance of one’s actions is necessary for expressing quality of will through those actions and, consequently, for moral responsibility. On the one hand, a number of philosophers have argued that agents display indifference or ill will in forgetfulness, automatic behavior, and implicit stereotyping, where awareness of the moral significance of one’s actions is notably absent. On the other hand, philosophers have argued that in such cases agents fail to express quality of will precisely because of their lack of awareness of the moral significance of their actions. I have argued that by taking a closer look at the temporal dimensions of moral responsibility, we can uncover a middle ground.

Perhaps the most important temporal dimension in moral responsibility is the distinction between synchronic responsibility and diachronic responsibility, or responsibility at the time of the action and responsibility sometime after the action. In the first chapter, I argued that in general, a change of heart has a limited effect on diachronic responsibility. The distinction between synchronic responsibility and diachronic responsibility helps to set the stage for disentangling intuitions pertaining to recurring and enduring actions, such as habitual behavior and planned actions.

With regard to habitual behavior, I argued in the second chapter that awareness of the moral significance of one’s actions needs to figure somewhere in the history of the action, but not necessarily at the time of action. The functional role of this form of awareness allows the quality of will to manifest itself in behavior. However, the timing of this awareness of the moral significance of one’s actions is relevant. One does not need to be aware of the moral significance at the time of action if the action is based on earlier learned behavior or figures in a distal intention. This constitutes a moderate position on the role of consciousness in moral responsibility.
Tracing is often regarded as a way to account for responsibility in cases at the limits of our awareness, such as unwitting omissions and habitual behavior. Tracing is the best-known example of how the temporal dimensions of moral responsibility might reveal the importance of history for responsibility in the here and now. I argued in the third chapter that tracing cannot account for how intoxicated behavior, habitual behavior, or unwitting omissions are expressions of quality of will. In the fourth chapter, I argued that agents are not morally responsible for unwitting omissions. Nevertheless, there is a practice, which I call Accident Resolution, by which we have the means to handle unwitting omissions. Accident Resolution holds that it is fitting for agents to feel guilty for unwitting omissions, that we are sometimes warranted to blame the omitter, and that the damaging party will usually incur a duty to offer compensation. However, unwitting omissions are not expressive of quality of will.

Analyzing the temporal dimensions of moral responsibility also helps to reveal why agents can be morally responsible for spontaneous behavior that manifests attitudes they are not aware of having at the time of action and do not endorse after the event even if awareness of the moral significance of one’s actions is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. The distinction drawn in Chapter 1 between synchronic and diachronic responsibility helps to make sense of the role of awareness and endorsement after the fact, which may affect diachronic responsibility but not synchronic responsibility. In Chapter 5, I draw a distinction between awareness of the moral significance of one’s action at the time of action and reflective awareness, i.e. awareness of the content of one’s attitudes after the event. The upshot is that even when agents fail to be reflectively aware of the content of their attitudes, they can still be responsible for spontaneous behavior if awareness of the moral significance plays a role in the history of the action.

Awareness of the moral significance of our actions is crucial for moral responsibility, but its role can be indirect and obfuscated by lack of reflective awareness. Therefore, we do not need to abandon awareness as a condition for moral responsibility altogether. In order to untangle our intuitions about
moral responsibility in cases at the limits of awareness, it is important to take note of key distinctions across time, whether the distinction between synchronic responsibility and diachronic responsibility or between foreseeing, concurrent awareness, and reflective awareness. By appreciating these distinctions, we can recognize the relative importance of awareness when it comes to manifesting quality of will in actions and, consequently, its importance for moral responsibility.