

Chapter 17: Responsibility

“Who Is To Blame?”

Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it.

— George Bernard Shaw

Assumptions about responsibility are centrally important in analyzing disputes. This chapter explains why. Because such assumptions often are only implied, it also explains how to detect them.

Who should be blamed or praised? Who most deserves help? To what extent is anyone responsible for what they do? Are personal choices subtly shaped by factors beyond individual control? Despite much scientific research and even more philosophical speculation, these still are open questions. Nevertheless, many arguments hinge on assumptions about personal freedom and responsibility.

Why Assumptions About Responsibility Are Important

The concept of "responsibility" figures into disputes as issues of guilt, fault and blame or who deserves credit, reward or help. These matters are centrally involved in many controversial issues. Consider the present welfare debate. On one side are those who argue that much of the blame for the present situation rests with individuals who prefer indolence to a job, provided the welfare check arrives regularly. The other side responds that unemployment has more to do with massive changes in the economy that have resulted in there not being enough jobs to go around. The first argument focuses fault and blame on individuals; the second points to issues individuals cannot control. Both arguments hinge on assumptions about responsibility.

"Unto whosoever much is given, of him shall much be required."

— Bible, Luke 12:48

Under what conditions is an individual ordinarily thought to be personally responsible? Generally, only when he or she is believed to have:

- 1) done it or brought something about and
- 2) done it or brought it about freely, and deliberately

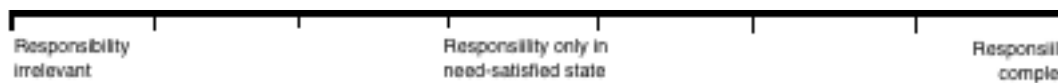
But there is extensive disagreement concerning how "free" and "deliberate" human behavior really is. Let's briefly review various opinions.

Some maintain that human behavior is so hemmed in by biological and social restrictions that responsibility and blame are severely limited. A few even argue that such restrictions totally eliminate personal freedom and responsibility. In this extreme view nature and/or nurture rules us, taking us totally beyond responsibility.

A more moderate view asserts that people can, in fact, freely choose the course of their lives; but only if their basic needs for things like love, acceptance, security and nourishment have been at least minimally met. In this perspective the only people who are fully responsible are those who have fully satisfied these deficiency needs.

Finally there are those who argue that, barring abnormalities, human behavior is entirely the consequence of individual choices. From this point of view all normal human beings are fully and personally responsible for who they are and how they behave.

These differing opinions are graphically represented on a continuum below.



Once again, why is any of this relevant to analyzing disputes? Because many disagreements explicitly, or by inference, involve laying blame, assigning rewards, deciding who deserves help or who deserves praise, and so forth. These matters, in turn, hinge on explicit or implied assumptions about freedom and responsibility.

Now let's move on to applying this to dispute analysis..

Step 1) Determine if the dispute involves assumptions about responsibility

Disputants seldom announce their assumptions about responsibility. (Indeed, they may be blissfully unaware of making any.) Their suppositions are commonly buried in other rhetoric. Nevertheless, such assumptions are present if the dispute involves:

- who, or what, deserves blame
- who merits praise or reward
- who deserves help or assistance

So in analyzing any dispute ask, "are such issues involved?" For additional clues look for judgmental terms like "should," or "ought." They generally indicate that a dispute involves assumptions about freedom and responsibility.

Consider the present heated debate about whether or not to eliminate government aid to unwed mothers and their babies. One side argues that such aid encourages irresponsibility and welfare dependency. Their adversaries claim eliminating this aid is heartless and stupid. Both are making assumptions about freedom and responsibility. How can we know that? Because the conflict is about who, or what, is to blame when children have children. It is also about who, in turn, deserves help or assistance. And both sides argue in terms of "oughts" and "shoulds." All of this alerts us to the fact that the dispute involves assumptions about freedom and responsibility.

Step 2) Identify who, or what, the disputants think is responsible

Earlier we said disputants assumptions about responsibility can often only be inferred. How can you spot such inferences? By carefully considering what is being argued.

"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves..."

— Shakespeare

Consider, once again, the heated national debate about curtailing or eliminating government aid to unwed mothers and their babies. Hard-line opponents argue for eliminating such assistance because it unintentionally rewards impoverished teenage girls for having babies out of wedlock. The only way to stop such undesirable behavior, say these critics, is to allow those who choose pregnancy to "enjoy" the *full* consequences of that choice. They concede that, like innocent civilians killed in vitally necessary bombing raids, babies will receive "collateral damage." But there simply is no other practical way, they argue, to discourage the birth of ever more such babies in the future.

What is being assumed about freedom and responsibility here? That children having children know how to avoid pregnancy, how hard it is to get a decent job, how scarce inexpensive day care is, how unlikely it is that the father will assume his responsibilities, and so forth. Plus, and this is crucial, that knowing this, such youngsters *freely* and *deliberately* choose to at least risk pregnancy or to deliberately conceive.

What follows logically from these assumptions? That when a child is born that cannot be nurtured as it should, the mother (and, of course, the father), are personally to blame because they freely chose to at least risk parenthood. Thus, unlike persons who have been victimized though no fault of their own, these parents have no legitimate claim on public assistance. The blameless baby does; but, these critics argue, there is no practical way to aid the baby without also aiding at least the mother, thus encouraging further irresponsibility.

Those in favor of continuing Aid to Dependent Children respond that if we knew enough about these girl's home-life, the mean streets they walk, their desperate need to love and be loved, their naive view of what it takes to raise a baby, their lack of real opportunity for a better life, their immaturity, we would understand why they stumble into pregnancy.

Who, or what, *is* assumed responsible in this interpretation? Fault lies in a socio-economic system that, because of a maldistribution of wealth, forces people into a desperate culture of poverty. Ensnared in a web of misery they do not understand, much less control, children do have children; these advocates say, but they can hardly be said to have really *freely* and *deliberately* chosen. They are, it is argued, actually victims of their circumstances. And their babies too are victims. So both parent and child have legitimate claims on public assistance.

"...the folly or vice of one man often makes many miserable."

— Samuel Johnson

It is unimportant whether you agree or disagree with either of these positions. It is just an example. What *is* important is that you be able to tell when disputes involve assumptions about:

- Who has what options?
- Who is aware of their options?
- Who is in control?
- Who is not?

So in analyzing disputes involving responsibility, ask:

- Who is portrayed as having no choice?
- What is assumed about range of, and knowledge of, choices?
- What assumptions are being made about control?

These questions are crucial in analyzing disputes involving issues of freedom and responsibility.

Step 3) Consider that disputants' assumptions about responsibility might be wrong

Many arguments hinge on false, or at least dubious, assertions regarding responsibility. Here is a real-life example. Here is an example. To adjudicate a highly controversial school desegregation case, Pennsylvania Commonwealth Judge Doris Smith established a blue ribbon panel to plan a remedy for disparities in achievement and opportunity found in the Philadelphia public schools. The Team consulted with thousands of people before issuing its findings. Then they reported to Judge Smith,

"The School District of Philadelphia has been confronted with obstacles plaguing most urban school districts in the United States: declining budgets, deteriorating buildings, increasing numbers of students with special needs, an exodus of middle class families, divisive local and state politics, declining levels of student achievement, top-heavy bureaucracies and union conflicts, as well as violence, vandalism, health care needs, absenteeism, teenage pregnancy and dropout levels that make teaching and learning a secondary focus in the City's schools."

Significantly, the Team then added,

"Student achievement in the School district of Philadelphia has also been limited by low expectations spawned by the myth that poverty limits what students can learn. Again and again, in public meetings and in focus groups with teachers, administrators and public officials, the Team members hear that children are "broken," not by poor schools, but by life circumstances including poverty, health problems, emotional and substance abuse, and the existence of teenage, single-parent families. Blaming low achievement on these "powerless to control" forces is dangerous because it fosters a lack of accountability ... the responsibility of the School District is to ensure that high quality teaching and learning occurs in every school"

Note the Team claims it is a "myth" that poverty limits what students can learn. Thus the "School District" is accountable when high quality learning does not take place in every school. But is the Team right in assuming that School District educators have enough control over critical factors to "...ensure high quality ... learning." When we

review research on this subject two studies stand out. The most extensive study came out of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, when Congress ordered the Commissioner of Education to study this very issue. Harvard Professor of Education James Coleman was selected to head the study team. Coleman's massive survey of 600,000 children in all 50 states pointed to the critical importance of *non-school* factors, particularly, family background, in variations in school achievement. The study summarized this finding as follows:

"One implication stands out above all: That schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school."

Another massive research project conducted eight years later confirmed Coleman's findings. Christopher Jencks' extensive study of American social differences as they relate to schooling took three years to complete. Like Coleman's study, it revealed that school results are influenced almost solely by the characteristics of the entering children. Jencks' study concluded:

"... children seem to be far more influenced by what happens at home than what happens in school. They may also be more influenced by what happens on the streets and by what they see on television." "Everything else— the school budget, its policies, the characteristics of the teachers — is either secondary or completely irrelevant."

So the two most extensive studies available directly contradict the assertion that officials of the School District of Philadelphia can fairly be held responsible for schooling failures. Of course, these two studies are not the last word; and new things have been learned about improving teaching and learning since they were completed. Still, it won't do to simply "blow off" the importance of non-school factors as a "myth." School District officials are certainly responsible for insuring high quality teaching. But, given what Coleman and Jencks' research reveals, should they also be held responsible for ensuring "high quality learning?"

Keep in mind, then, that disputants assertions, or assumptions, about responsibility might well be wrong. In analyzing any dispute involving freedom and responsibility ask:

- Do the antagonists present any evidence to support their assumptions?
- Does research offer contrary evidence regarding who, or what, is responsible?

Chapter Highlights

Many arguments hinge on assumptions about personal freedom and accountability. These assumptions are important even if many of them are only implied. Some assumptions about freedom and responsibility might be unsupported by evidence. So to better understand any dispute ask:

- Does the dispute involves assumptions about freedom and responsibility?

- If so, who, or what, do the disputants assume to be responsible?
- is there evidence to support either side's assumptions?

Other Related Chapters in This Text

3, Reification	8, Presuppositions
6. Name -Calling	10, The Nature of Society
7. Reason and Logic in Disputes	15, Fact and Value

Keywords for Further Data Base Searches

accountability	tort	sin
liability	negligence	reparation
fault	shame	excuse

Test Yourself

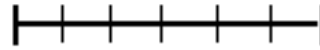
Evaluate the following statements by estimating how much individual responsibility is implied. Circle the appropriate area of the continuum. Remember, people are ordinarily thought to be personally responsible only when they are believed to have:

- 1) done it or brought something about and
- 2) done it or brought it about freely. and deliberately

Statement	Degree of Responsibility on the Part of the Poor.
<p><i>"People who are much too sensitive to demand of cripples that they run races, ask of the poor that they get up and act just like everyone else in society."</i></p> <p>—Michael Harrington</p>	
<p><i>"Poverty has many roots, but the tap toot is ignorance."</i></p> <p>—Lyndon Johnson</p>	
<p><i>"In a change of government, the poor change nothing beyond the change of their masters."</i></p> <p>—Phaedrus</p>	
<p><i>"It is easy to say that poverty is no crime. No, if it were men wouldn't be ashamed of it. It's a blunder, though, and punished as such."</i></p> <p>—Jerome K. Jerome</p>	

"Poverty is no disgrace, but no honor either."

—Yiddish Proverb



Answers:

1. With regard to Harrington's statement, the impoverished person has diminished responsibility. The area circled should be to the right of the continuum.
2. With regard to Johnson's statement, the issue of responsibility is obscured by another question. How responsible are the ignorant for their own condition? Where the circle goes depends on that answer.
3. With respect to Phaedrus' statement, the term "master" suggests someone else is at least primarily responsible. The circle goes near the "not responsible" end of the continuum.
4. Jerome's statement is difficult to place on the continuum. Presumably, if it is a "blunder" to be poor, the circle must go somewhere on the "responsible" side of the continuum.
5. This Yiddish proverb wryly suggests that the individual is responsible enough to make poverty "no honor," but not sufficiently responsible to make it a disgrace. Perhaps the middle of the continuum should be circled. It's a tough call.

Chapter Review Sheet

1. Describe the chapter briefly in your own words.

2. What are the core ideas developed in this chapter? If more than one, list them in order of their importance to you.

3. Briefly explain the importance to you of your first choice.

4. Briefly describe a scenario in which you could apply one of the ideas from the chapter to improve your professional practice.

5. Connect this chapter to at least one thing you already know.

6. Suggest one way to make this chapter more effective.
