

Responsibility: A Confessional-Ethical Splice

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I. Responsibility As “Consequentialist”

Thesis One. The immediate social concern here is that people by the millions—notably in modern bureaucratic societies, capitalist as well as socialist—continually bear the fateful consequences of decisions in which they have small part, and that it is a reactionary understatement to say that what they are being denied is merely power or self-determination or even their rights. What they are being denied is responsibility, also coram Deo.

Thesis Two. By the same token of course those who do have a part in the decisions, just because their decisions are far-reaching and impinge upon others than themselves, are to that extent removed from the consequences of their own acts. What they too are removed from, really, is responsibility, also coram Deo.

Thesis Three. Either way, responsibility is being disengaged from consequences. However, to take responsibility is always a doubletake: not only taking action or initiative but taking consequences as well. But then, conversely, taking the consequences of someone else’s action should entitle also the consequence-takers to share in the action itself, that being in fact their responsibility.

Thesis Four. This “consequentialist” entitlement to responsibility may be generalized into a rough correlation: whoever shares in the action should share in its consequences, and whoever shares in the consequences should share in the action.

Thesis Five. In that correlation’s first proposition, “whoever shares in the action should share in its consequences,” the “consequences” at issue here are not the kind which, if their agent foregoes them, will then not happen to anyone at all – victim-less or beneficiary-less consequences. My concern, in other words, is not with recompense as such, whether consequences should be borne, but proceeds from the assumption that consequences are already being borne. The question then is, By whom? By whom all?

Thesis Six. Consequences do indeed happen, but, far too often, to others than the agent herself. Her responsibility in that case is not merely private, to shoulder solo what she has brought upon herself, but rather social and communitarian, to “share” in those consequences which—intentionally or not—she has brought upon others.

Thesis Seven. Even then the acid test of her sharing is in how reciprocal it is. As she joins in bearing the consequences which befall others, which after all are her doing, does she in turn welcome those others to share in that action of hers which determines such consequences? Not that they depend for that new responsibility upon her granting it. They are drawn into it by reason of their consequence-taking.

Thesis Eight. To say we are as responsible for our consequences as for our actions is not to deny that agency is prior, that it is of course for actions that we are the more directly responsible—actions being our “response” at its point of origin,

as ours—and that consequences are our responsibility at all only if and as they are our doing.

Thesis Nine. For that very reason, however, even patients, those who are merely done to or done for, are already doing something of what responsible agents do, though only truncatedly: taking consequences. Yet once patients are even that implicated in the responsibility-bearing, if only after the act, there is for them now no responsible way out except to become still further involved a full agents, as firsthand influencers of the consequences they bear.

Thesis Ten. In accepting the consequences, patients are committed thereby to becoming agents, first-order respondents, and thus all the more accountable. This undertow from reciprocity back toward moral beginnings, authorship, is a lure which recipients cannot abjure, at least not rightly, anymore than agents may disclaim their own effects.

Thesis Eleven. In the above correlation (Thesis Four) the first of the two propositions—“whoever shares in the action should share in its consequences”—may well enjoy the wider and more long-standing acceptance. If so, the second proposition—“and whoever shares in the consequences should share in the action”—might gain additional plausibility just by being paired with its venerable predecessor as a correlate.

Thesis Twelve. For that matter, the second proposition hardly lacks for credentials of its own, all the way from medieval theories of consent—“what touches all, all must approve” (IV. Lateran Council)—to recent theories of corporate management—“the right to be involved in decisions affecting oneself” (Likert). Notice, again, what determines who all are to “approve” and “be involved in decisions” is whether they are thereby “affected”, “touched”—that is, whether they incur the consequences.

Thesis Thirteen. Still, this inferring of responsibility from consequence-taking is probably rooted in something more “given” than the discursive assent of those who happen to reflect on it. The above responsibility-correlation reflects, I suspect, that empirical reality which sociologists have called “the norm of reciprocity,” so basic to social stability, the reciprocity which Habermas (outdoing Gouldner) finds to be not merely “a norm but is fixed in the general structures of possible interaction.”

Thesis Fourteen. What our correlation describes may be nothing more than an elementary mechanism within creation itself which triggers human creatures towards responsible personhood—and why it should, ethically. That is, the inviolable climax of every gift they are given, whatever that is, is finally the gift to be able to respond to it on their own.

Thesis Fifteen. Something like that occurs as children mature into adults, and perhaps in most historical developments as responsibilities change hands. But the change comes destructively when those recipients who are no longer children continue to be treated as such and are infantilized into dependency, inaction and finally irresponsibility.

II. Responsibility Coram Deo

Thesis Sixteen. The theological opportunity, as I see it, is to engage this nexus between consequence-taking and the responsibility it entails, and to radicalize that—to re-root it—in responsibility coram Deo. The corresponding theological risk is that by upping the responsibility ante that high we may, ethically, price ourselves out of the market.

Thesis Seventeen. At the least his theological radicalizing would mean that all human actions, even the most original, are

finally not spontaneous at all (sponte) but only responses to “the ultimate action” “as I encounter the One in all that acts upon me.” (H.R. Niebuhr) Which is to say, vis-a-vis this One we all, every moment over, begin anew as consequence-takers.

Thesis Eighteen. However, our very accepting of these virtually inexhaustible consequences—for example, just waking up in the morning to the gift of Friday, another day to live—automatically recasts us in the role of agents. “For all this [Creator’s bounty]”, says Luther, “I am bound to thank, praise, serve and obey him”—that is, bound to do, not just be done to or done for.

Thesis Nineteen. Granted, it is a pity that we, being unresponsive, need to be “bound” – schuldig, indebted, obligated—to do what otherwise would come as a free and unconstrained response. Even so, under pressure from the sheer lavishness of the gifts, doers is what we are constrained to be, willy nilly, and so accountable. No matter that the account falls farther and farther in arrears as the gifts continue to abound and the thanks and praise do not. The accountability persists.

Thesis Twenty. But now as accountable agents in our own right we, in turn, evoke responses from others, even from the One. The theological symbol of “response” extends to God as well, not only as primordial agent but also as ultimate respondent, who is so free as to respond contingently upon our antecedent actions. That seriously does God take our historic activity, as consequential for Godself.

Thesis Twenty-One. Maybe even Niebuhr might be invoked—I hope, not against his intention—for including God too as Respondent to our actions. “Our actions are responsible not only insofar as they are reactions to...actions upon us but also insofar as they are made in anticipation of answers to our answers.” (So do our

answers condition God's answers?)

Thesis Twenty-Two. If the myriad, finite "answers to our answers" are also finally the Creator's answers, then his answers are the consequences of our actions, which consequences it is our further responsibility to take. "Responsibility," says Niebuhr, "lies in the agent who stays with his action, who accepts the consequences in the form of reactions and looks forward in a present deed to the continued interaction."

Thesis Twenty-Three. I am much less confident of Niebuhr's support for my next proposal: not only do the consequences of our actions express the divine "answers" to our actions but these same consequences—the most earthy consequences, pleasant or painful, lethal or life-giving—reflect also the divine evaluation of our actions, indeed the evaluation of ourselves as agents.

Thesis Twenty-Four. Not that good outcomes prove our actions right or that bad outcomes prove them wrong. Too often they do not. Anyway, that is not the sense of "consequentialism" I have in mind.

Thesis Twenty-Five. On the other hand, what I would maintain is that the consequences we incur, even the most ambiguous or unjust, do in fact compel us as nothing else does to attend to our own value, our liability—if only to prove in self-defense that the consequences are actually inconclusive and "prove nothing" about us. The consequences we get, if they are not sure-fire criteria for evaluating us, are still occasions for it—not always good clues, perhaps, but cues definitely.

Thesis Twenty-Six. If that very creating by which human receivers are elevated into responsible doers sets them up simultaneously to be critiqued through their effects, that is, if this same process is not only "the ultimate One's" creating

them for response by acting upon them but then also being their Critic by responding to them through the concrete outcomes of their actions, then surely it is inappropriate to disengage this One as Actor from the Same One as serious Critic.

Thesis Twenty-Seven. In other words, I believe it is not really necessary, for salvaging “the ultimate One’s” monotheistic integrity, to neutralize the decisive criticalness of the divine responses to us and, in the bargain, to forfeit how fateful human action still has the awesome dignity to be.

Thesis Twenty-Eight. But that is the misimpression I fear—namely, that what is at stake in people’s treatment of one another is not all that much in the balance after all and that, backstage, the odds have been safely hedged all along—when Niebuhr says, “Whatever is, is good,...no matter how unrighteous it is in relation to finite companions.” (Responsible Self, p. 125) Or: “There is no evil in the city but the Lord has done it; no crucifixion but the One has crucified.” (Responsible Self, p. 125)

Thesis Twenty-Nine. Worse yet, if “whatever is, is good,” then not only is it impossible for human beings to do their “finite companions” wrong, infinite wrong. It is impossible, as any doing of theirs, to do one another good. For whatever sharing they may do in one another’s consequences and actions—in the long run, all things considered—would have been good anyway.

Thesis Thirty. On such terms, while human persons may in some sense still be responsible, their responses to one another have no options ultimately and, in that sense, in the last throw of the stone, are inconsequential.

Thesis Thirty-One. By contrast, I am suggestion, the consequences we bear, along with everything else they mean to us (maritally, vocationally, internationally, actuarially), do

simultaneously mean the “answers” from that One whose approval or disapproval means more to us than everyone else’s together, reflecting as those consequences then do how decisively consequential to Godself is our sharing or not sharing with our “finite companions.”

Thesis Thirty-Two. That being so, there is then theological ground as well—shall I say, soteriological ground—why the consequence-takers themselves, not just some other, absentee agents, should be the ones to share firsthand in the actions upon them, seeing that it is they upon whom the consequences already so profoundly reflect.

III. Exceptions/Evasions

Thesis Thirty-Three. The previous correlation—“Whoever shares in the action should share in its consequences, and whoever shares in its consequences should share in the action”—suffers what any self-respecting norm does (like “Love your enemy”, “To each his due”): it faces a hopeless dilemma. Because what it demands is impossible, it requires exceptions; because the exceptions serve also as evasions, they require suspicion.

Thesis Thirty-Four. Not only politics but in its own way also ethics has to be the art of the possible. Recalling the Christian-Stoic “concept of every man as somehow equal before God”, Alasdair MacIntyre notes, “it provided a ground for attacking [slavery and serfdom] whenever their abolition appeared remotely possible.” Some concession to human achievability, if ethics is to be for humans at all, is not only inescapable but right.

Thesis Thirty-Five. But that same show of right which legitimates genuine concessions also, alas, legitimates exploitation. Decision-makers who are afraid to share in the

consequences they impose upon others, or afraid to include the consequence-takers in their decision-making, can as a matter of fact defend their oppressiveness with the most honestly plausible half-truths. So plausible, in fact, that this ideological abuse of exceptions is concurred in by the exploited consequence-takers themselves, who for reasons of their own may also fear new responsibility.

Thesis Thirty-Six. As a first example of an exception-evasion, consider the following. Not all the consequences we bear, in fact exasperatingly few of them, do we have time and energy to participate in effecting. So the legitimate exception we invoke—the word is prioritizing—is to pick and choose between those outcomes, on the one hand, which are relatively less momentous and so have to be accomplished without us and, on the other hand, those outcomes which are so consequential that we simply have to share firsthand responsibility for deciding them.

Thesis Thirty-Seven. But as we know, prioritizing seems also to offer an easy way out— seems to, though it does not really. To rank responsibilities according to their claim on us, ranking some of them out of our schedules altogether, is itself an act for which as moral agents we still bear responsibility, including the consequences—also from the ultimate Respondent.

Thesis Thirty-Eight. Another, especially paradoxical exception is that we delegate our share of the action to representatives—anyone from baby-sitters to nursing homes to the United States Senate—and with conscientious justification for doing so.

Thesis Thirty-Nine. Does delegation, too, function as evasion? Undoubtedly. In view of the palpable transfer of power from the self to these “delegates,” it is understandable that some ethicists are skeptical about the “myth of self-government” as a

democratic “illusion.” (Pannenberg) However, the important ethical irony which delegation serves to safeguard is precisely that “life cannot be delegated” (Mumford) and so, though we must choose stand-ins to act in our stead, we choose also thereby to bear responsibility (including consequences for their acts –coram Deo as well.)

Thesis Forty. Prioritizing, delegating—and then there is a third exception. Far oftener than not the consequences we presently are bearing were already enacted long since, irrevocably—our ancestry, both genetic and cultural, the Holocaust and Hiroshima, Magna Carta and King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail. So there is no longer any way for us responsibly to do what nevertheless we must do, get in on their launching or preventing.

Thesis Forty-One. Right, there is no way, except...How shall we call this exception? Call it equivalence. We simulate co-authorship in these faits accomplis by responding to them “in kind”, re-doing or undoing what should have been done originally but now by means of its “moral equivalent” for today. A treacherously tempting copout! But usually it is the only recourse we have for becoming equivalently responsible, before God and history, for the consequences we inherit.

Thesis Forty-Two. Another exception is privatizing. The consequences which come to us at the hands of others—oil prices, our own literacy, our teenagers’ friends, the registrar’s memos—usually come to us not as uniquely fated individuals but as members of some group or class, probably because we are members of that class. And the agents from whom those consequences come likewise act not as lone originals (not even the registrar) but because of the class to which they belong, into whose agent-class we must somehow gain access if we are to expand responsibility for our lot. Generic—better, corporate—responsibility is the rule, private is not. But again,

no doubt, there are exceptions.

Thesis Forty-Three. When does this exception—namely, to privatize otherwise corporate responsibility—become an evasion, as it flagrantly does? Answer: when those agents who decide the fate of one of my peers (for example, Hans Kung) minimize the fact that it is an entire class of us who are being affected; and when I, fearing the call to co-agency with him, concur with them, and so renege. To have to share responsibility with one's whole motley class, consequences and all, is daunting all right, especially in The Last Analysis.

Thesis Forty-Four. How about benevolence, as an exception to our correlation? While those who share in the action should ordinarily share in the consequences, do they have to even when the consequences they extend to others are benign? May not agents confer some pleasant consequence upon their beneficiaries as a sheer favor, a gift, abstaining from their "share" in it out of simple generosity? Conversely, while those who share in the consequences should ordinarily share in the action, should they even when the deed done them is already right and needs no intervention by them to correct it? In short, doesn't our correlation need to make an exception for benevolence? I think not.

Thesis Forty-Five. Especially not, if that implies that benevolence itself is exceptional and that our responsibility-correlation is posited on the opposite, a condition of maximal social malevolence. But I do admit that some might take exception to our correlation, erroneously, on the strength of a "benevolence" which actually is misguided and paternalistic. There are agents galore, not only in the military but in most bureaucratic organizations, who with the best will in the world "spare" their consequence-takers the responsibility of decision sharing because they themselves know what is best, morally best,

for all concerned—and may well be right. What an alluring evasion that affords also the consequence-takers who, if they did intervene in the decision-making, might get it wrong, infinitely.

Thesis Forty-Six. Of all the exceptions to our correlation, surely bureaucracy itself is the single most “rational” exception and by now the most institutionalized. “Rational,” in the Weberian sense of being the most “efficient” administering of means to ends. Its efficacious means are the technical superiority of bureaucracy’s experts. The utilitarian necessity to divide these elite agents objectively, according to their specialties, divides them also of course from many of the most fateful consequences of their own work and, conversely, divides those whom they affect from significant responsibility in the decisions.

Thesis Forty-Seven. True, the moral fury against this bureaucratic phenomenon mounts, no longer only from the right and the left but now from the middle as well, and from bureaucrats themselves. By now the word “bureaucracy” is almost universally a stigma.

Thesis Forty-Eight. At the same time the fact that this “iron cage of serfdom”, as Weber warned, is for our age a sheer necessity, almost everyone—including the complainants—incongruously agrees. Though grudgingly, so do I. Even Richard Rubenstein, who has proved how intrinsic bureaucratic management was to the Holocaust, nevertheless assures his readers that he has no “intention to plead for a utopian end to bureaucracy.”

Thesis Forty-Nine. But bureaucracy, though it may be an unavoidable exception to our responsibility-correlation, degenerates into a massive evasion of that responsibility when we forget that an exception is truly all it is, when instead we

cynically imagine bureaucratic organization to be a normative way of working and living together generally—of all things, also in small-scale, voluntary, communitarian organizations— even when the commonwealth itself is better served, just pragmatically, by having consequence-takers share in the action. As if bureaucracy no longer needed, every step of the way, extenuating justification.

Thesis Fifty. Earlier on (Thesis Sixteen) we voiced the misgiving that, by raising the responsibility ante as high as we have, we may be pricing ourselves out of the ethical market. Even our conceding that there need to be practical exceptions is still not sufficiently consoling. For no sooner did we admit the exceptions than we turned right around and exposed the exceptions for doubling as irresponsible evasions.

Thesis Fifty-One. This sort of stringency might be justified, I suppose, on the grounds that ethical expectations are governed not merely by what is socially feasible but ought to hold out for enough transcendence to be prophetically critical as well. Especially is that so in theological ethics, where criticism—as Christians have had to relearn from modern non-Christian “masters of suspicion”—is a primary activity of Theos.

Thesis Fifty-Two. That truth itself, that the consequences we must anticipate to our actions reflect somehow the evaluation of our society by its ultimate Critic, may help to explain why society evolves such elaborate plausibility structures for evading responsibility-taking, both consequences and decisions. Why such intricately structured, uniform dread of sharing responsibility with one another? Is it that, if we did share responsibility, we might no longer be able so effectively to evade the “Answers to our answers”? In my judgment it would be unreasonable of us, if only as ethicists, to write off all that cowardice as nothing more than mass illusion, as groundless

fear.

Thesis Fifty-Three. Yet there might also be an altogether different, more affirmative reason for stretching the responsibility-correlation as ambitiously as we have, and that is that there is after all some promise of realizing it. Some promise! But that, depending on the remaining theses, remains to be seen.

IV. A Confessional Exception

Thesis Fifty-Four. Assume that those who share in the action should share in its consequences and that those who share in its consequences should share in the action. Assume also that this highly ambitious responsibility-correlation owes something at least to the historic influence of Christians. But if so, what a crowning irony it is—the New Testament speaks of a “mystery” or, more bluntly, a “scandal”—that these Christians not only make practical exceptions to the correlation along the way (who doesn’t?) but rather that they proceed from an exception in the first place, designedly so, as the very arche of their entire responsibility ethos.

Thesis Fifty-Five. Rather than begin by accepting their own share of the common responsibility, which would be only fair, Christians begin instead by shifting responsibility to someone else in their own number, Jesus the Christ.

Thesis Fifty-Six. Candidly they admit that if they were to opt for simple fairness—which does continue to be for them the other option—no one in the long run would be able to stand that much fairness. So they dare to believe about The Long Run, the ultimate fairness, that Christ can anticipate it for them, not in the sense merely that he can hasten it—that by itself would be no gain—but in the more profitable sense that he can scoop

it, beat it to the draw, avert it.

Thesis Fifty-Seven. As is evident from all this, Christianity was not above borrowing heavily from non-Christian religions, in this case a rather unprestigious one, Jewish apocalypticism. But while that movement took our responsibility-correlation (or something roughly like it) with unexceptional seriousness, Jesus upped its ante even higher, pricing it out of the market for even the most responsible of people and thus exposed the last possible evasion.

Thesis Fifty-Eight. Still, he then turned right around and, for even the most irresponsible, announced himself as a way out, a unique exception to this whole apocalyptic, ethically serious prospect of shared actions and consequences—not at all by discounting that prospect but on the contrary, as we said, by offering to undergo its consequence for others before it was too late.

Thesis Fifty-Nine. He claimed authorization for interposing himself and his own fate as a sort of diversionary, heading-off-at-the-pass pre-apocalypse for all those who, for reasons of their own, opt for this improbable Exception. Really, they have no more reason for believing it than Jesus did, except for the fact that for people like themselves the news sounds too good to forego.

Thesis Sixty. It is only our own complicity in this attractive Exception, frankly, which compels me and others to deny that it is an unethical evasion, as it must seem to be and, as we do concede, it often can be. Rather than call this Exception unethical, we might settle for “non-ethical.” “Ultra-rational” (Reinhold Niebuhr) or “hyper-ethical” (Ricoeur) might be alternatives. Or perhaps, though in a sense very different from Dewey’s, “metaethical.”

Thesis Sixty-One. However prominently our responsibility-correlation figures in the Christian ethos generally, the truth is, it roots in a prior story which is not immediately ethical. Christian theological ethicists are wont to confess that.

Thesis Sixty-Two. On the other hand, it is then all the more important to confess how the christological Exception is not non-ethical. It does not (contra Anselm) transpire above and apart from the biographies of the Christians themselves, as if by Christ's intervention they were somehow excepted from sharing for which the one Exception serves to liberate them.

Thesis Sixty-Three. In other words, the Exception Christ promises them is clearly not a no-lose situation. Not only does he warn against trying to "gain one's life" (psych'e) as bound to lose. His own promising antithesis to that is no less a losing situation. The exception is not that those who follow him do not also lose but rather that what they lose—"everything"—he loses with them. (Which drastically redefines any teleological ethics.) Only because he and they share that all-out loss of themselves for the world do they also share, each day over, the surpassing "winning back" of his resurrection.

V. Terminological Postscript

Thesis Sixty-Four. James Gustafson's former caution is still needed, namely that one cannot "build a whole ethics on the back of one term, responsibility. It needs to be related to many other terms in discourse..."

Thesis Sixty-Five. Dozens of such terms come to mind, all of which invite redefining in keeping with what I have called a responsibility-correlation: democracy, leadership, authority, power, and so on. But time is up.

Thesis Sixty-Six. The one term for which I do wish to draw at least a quick connection with responsibility is the ubiquitous term nowadays, “rights.” Not only nowadays, however, but at least since the days of the Physiocrats, rights (whether “natural” or “civil” or “human”) have regularly been counterposed to responsibility. As if the latter were the needed opposite to balance and restrain the duty-evading, unsharing selfassertiveness which has come to be associated with rights. But that makes responsibility sound tendentiously negative.

Thesis Sixty-Seven. If responsibility, even when that includes sharing both consequences and decision-making, is a sharing for which the christological exception promises to free us, then responsibility is not a burden but is itself a right. It may in fact be most fundamental right of all, underlying every other freedom to which people are entitled: the right to share in responsibility.

Thesis Sixty-Eight. Recalling the earlier quotation from MacIntyre about implementing visionary Christian values only at times when that is “remotely possible,” I propose, in view of the growing impatience with bureaucratic serfdom, East and West, and the widescale lip-service at least to human rights, that to begin speaking of responsibility not as the opposite of a right but as itself a most basic right is “remotely possible.”

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