The Ethics of Belief in a Burning World

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Abstract. Danielle Celermajer advocates for reconceptualizing responsibility in light of the climate crisis. I argue instead that we must understand current concepts of responsibility which are implicit in actual responsibility practices. I illustrate this by appeal to the practice of holding each other responsible for our beliefs—a practice in which we are constantly involved, but which is often obscured. It extends our responsibility to involuntary aspects of our own mind and involves socially distributed cognitive duties. Cognitive responsibility is part and parcel of shared human conceptual frameworks that we should work to uncover and fully understand rather than revise.

Keywords. Climate Change, Climate Crisis, Ethics of Belief, Responsibility, Epistemology.

1. Introduction

Is the Australian Minister for the Environment responsible for the harms caused to present and future generations by permitting fossil fuel extraction? In response to Australian children’s objections to her decision, the Minister appeals to factors that are supposed to mitigate or even eradicate her personal responsibility: complicated causal chains, a lack of control over the exact consequences, and the involvement of other agents. Danielle Celermajer [forthcoming] argues that the Minister’s response to the Australian children highlights the limitations of inherited ways of thinking about responsibility in the face of the climate crisis. According to Celermajer,

[the systematicity of wrongdoing, the ways in which frameworks of accepted meaning had and have come to normalise violence, and the effective operation of institutions in recruiting virtually everyone into complicity, now render the inherited concepts of guilt and responsibility worse than useless. [p. 7]
I agree with Celermajer that conceptual work is needed to address the climate crisis. As philosophers and theorists, we should make central ethical concepts intelligible in order to equip society with the conceptual tools that are necessary to acknowledge our responsibility for participating in collective global harms and to take appropriate action. Yet I don’t think we should dismiss our inherited concepts. Instead, we need to carefully understand actual concepts of responsibility better by working out what is involved in shared human responsibility practices. This doesn’t mean that we don’t need to reconceive ethics—indeed, I think we might need an ‘ethics 2.0’ [Roser and Seidel 2017: 12] insofar as we must challenge widely held beliefs about responsibility. But this doesn’t imply changing the concept of responsibility itself. Rather, what we must dismiss are theories that fail to capture actual responsibility practices, such as what Celermajer calls ‘the classical liberal picture of responsibility’ [p. 8]. That is, we should take responsibility for our beliefs about responsibility, rather than reinvent concept(s) of responsibility.

To defend this claim, I first describe our current practice of holding each other cognitively responsible and bring out its importance [section 2]. This allows us to better understand personal responsibility in the climate crisis [section 3]. I then show how this practice is continuous with Celermajer’s view of responsibility, but also how the project of analysing this practice and its concepts differs from her proposed project of reconceptualizing responsibility [section 4].

2. Social Cognitive Responsibility

In his landmark essay ‘The Ethics of Belief’, William K. Clifford [1877: 70] imagines a shipowner who deceives himself into believing that his ship is seaworthy. Knowing that the ship is old and might need an overhaul, the shipowner nevertheless stifles his doubts by telling himself that his ship ‘had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms’, and so forming ‘a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy’. Consequently, he sends a crew to sea who never sees land again.

Clifford’s shipowner cannot evade responsibility by saying that he sincerely believed the ship was seaworthy. For, as Clifford reminds us throughout his essay, his belief was based on insufficient evidence. Moreover, we can add that it was caused by motivated self-deception: the shipowner wilfully ignored evidence against the ship’s seaworthiness by telling himself comfortable lies, which subsequently led to a harmful decision.
Contemporary epistemologists conclude from such cases that legitimately holding someone to account for their harmful actions often requires us to determine whether the belief on which the action was based was responsibly held [Montmarquet 1993; Peels 2017]. For if the shipowner was irresponsible in believing that it was morally permissible to send out the ship without an overhaul, then his irresponsible belief explains why he is blameworthy for the resulting harmful action of sending the ship to sea. In this sense at least, epistemology, which is concerned with the norms of belief, precedes ethics, which is concerned with the norms for decision and action.

Clifford’s shipowner cannot use his conviction to justify his action, because his conviction is itself irresponsible. The Australian Minister permits fossil fuel extraction, and dismisses the claims made on her by the Australian children, also based on her beliefs about when an agent is responsible for an outcome. Yet it’s prima facie unclear whether her beliefs are likewise irresponsible: were they caused by motivated self-deception, or could the Minister have been expected to adopt better conceptions of responsibility? To better understand the Minister’s personal responsibility, we need a broader social picture of cognitive responsibility.

Contemporary theorists of responsibility point out that we can intelligibly ask others for their reasons for belief [Hieronymi 2014; Smith 2005]. For instance, if I learn that John believes that 9/11 was a conspiracy of the US government, then I might request his evidence. If John refuses to give evidence, or if the evidence he provides seems insufficient to me, then I might judge that John’s belief is irrational. I might even come to doubt John’s intellectual character, by considering him to be dogmatic (if he fails to engage with counterevidence) or gullible (if he was too easily swayed by leading conspiracy theorists). That is, I might attribute certain intellectual vices to him. As a result, I might refuse to put trust in John’s testimony in the future, and I might expect him to redress his intellectual mistakes [Woodard Forthcoming], say, by revising this belief when he encounters evidence against it, and by regretting that he once believed such a stupid thing.

The everyday concepts emphasized in the last paragraph – reasons, evidence, rationality, vices, trust, and redress – are central to our shared human practice of social cognitive responsibility. Roughly, we request reasons or evidence for beliefs, we generally demand of each other to believe upon sufficient evidence (or to believe rationally), we blame each other if we fail to live up to these normative expectations, and we expect others to make up for such failures. This practice is deeply embedded in our daily lives. It helps us to maintain a functioning intellectual community in which we can rely on people’s testimony by default and pursue important goals together, based
on a mutual understanding of the world around us. If we neglect this practice, we threaten to fall apart as an intellectual community—polarization and echo chambers are looming.

This practice is social in a double sense. First, it involves engaging with other agents and taking them seriously as potential knowers by exchanging reasons and arguments. Second, it involves being responsible to others [Osborne 2020]: we owe it to others to base our beliefs on sufficient evidence, because we are vulnerable to how others conduct their cognitive lives in virtue of our dependence on each other. Holding each other responsible for beliefs enforces general adherence to evidence and argument in a society, which is in turn of practical value because it enables the collective pursuit of other goals, such as mitigating the climate catastrophe.

3. Personal Cognitive Responsibility

With this practice in mind, Celermajer’s case of the Australian Minister can be illuminated. The Minister is not an isolated individual outside any relationships of epistemic dependence. Rather, in gaining her beliefs about responsibility, she is engaged with and challenged by other epistemic agents. The Australian children are confronting her with the severe harms caused by her decision on fossil fuel extraction. They thereby demand justification not only for the Minister’s actions, but also for her underlying beliefs. In light of the charge they level against her, backed up by scientific evidence, the Minister’s appeal to questionable principles about responsibility – such as lack of sufficient closeness and directness of the people affected by climate change, or the indeterminate group of people who will be affected – turns out to be wanting. If the Minister remains convinced that these are legitimate reasons to believe that fossil fuel extraction is permissible, she will still continue to feel a normative pressure to revise these beliefs, given the expectations of other members of her intellectual community to reconsider such views.

Cognitive responsibility is never just a private matter. Rather, the Minister’s cognitive mistakes are also partly due to the failures of companies, politicians, researchers, and journalists. Their failures can lead to the spread of fake news, fake experts, conspiracy theories, as well as bad theories about central and important ethical-epistemological concepts, such as responsibility.

Appealing to other agents to make the Minister’s cognitive responsibility intelligible might seem to undermine her personal responsibility. This paradox has been observed by Hannah Arendt [1964: 21], who notes that regarding everyone in Germany, including its ‘collective past’, culpable
for the *Shoa* ‘in practice turned into a highly effective whitewash of all those who had actually done something, for where all are guilty, no one is’.

This paradox gets resolved by noticing the Minister’s *ongoing* duty to reflect on her beliefs, which is partly constituted by the legitimate expectations held towards her by other epistemic agents, such as the Australian children, to reconsider her beliefs about responsibility. As long as we hold each other accountable for beliefs within a legitimate social practice, the Minister’s personal responsibility becomes intelligible precisely because other agents are essentially complicit in her cognitive conduct by challenging or failing to challenge her beliefs. So, far from exculpating the Minister, emphasizing our epistemic dependence on other agents enforces personal responsibility: the Minister becomes more responsible for her decisions insofar as she is made aware of their consequences, their questionable intellectual foundations, and the fact that other agents disagree with her, especially those that are most vulnerable to the consequences of her decisions.

Clearly, this view requires much more space to be developed.¹ However, let me instead draw implications for Celermajer’s view for the sake of discussion.

4. Lessons to Draw

Note that much of what I said fits well with Celermajer’s advocacy for ‘multidimensional and expansive theories of responsibility’ [p. 9]. Her main target is the simple *liberal picture of responsibility*, which is founded on the idea of a ‘sovereign sphere of individual (human) agency’ [p. 5] and which relies on ‘linear and proximate models of causality, combined with an intentional and rational agent’ [p. 8]. This is the picture of responsibility on which the Australian Minister’s arguments are based. Celermajer contrasts it with the radical ‘unconditioned responsibility’ according to which all survivors of a severe wrong are ‘guilty of being still alive’ [Jaspers 1947: 72]. She then looks for a middle ground that, on the one hand, escapes the ‘pathologies generated by models of responsibility that bind it to the notion of the autonomous, freely acting and choosing agent, or the human imagined as disembedded from more-than-human relations’ [p. 13], but that, on the other hand, doesn’t imply unconditional guilt and allows for a meaningful distribution of backward-looking blameworthiness as well as forward-looking duties.

Our practice of social cognitive responsibility is well-suited to fit this middle ground. For it severs responsibility from individual agency: beliefs aren’t normally under the agent’s direct

¹ I develop parts of it in Schmidt [forthcoming], as well as some more recent projects.
voluntary control [Bennett 1990], and yet holding each other cognitively accountable is legitimate and useful. This practice is hardly intelligible when considering an isolated individual who isn’t engaged in the ongoing exchange of reasons. It also encourages extending responsibility more generally towards the more involuntary features of our mind – such as beliefs, but also desires and emotions. Celermajer mentions ‘people’s desire to render invisible their contributions to harms’ and notes that ‘if they are able to keep at bay difficult thoughts and feelings, they will also be able to avoid taking up their responsibilities’ [p. 20]. This indicates that the climate crisis demands not only an ethics of action and of belief, but also an ethics of mind [Schmidt 2020; forthcoming].

Furthermore, Celermajer points out that the harm of climate change arises within ‘enabling environments’ in which actors ‘bear contributory responsibility’ [p. 9]. Cognitive responsibility is likewise distributed among various agents. First, it requires a kind of collective monitoring of our epistemic environment [Goldberg 2021: 104–10] to avoid epistemic pollutants, such as fake news and fake experts, which can mislead us into rationally believing falsehoods [Levy 2021]. Second, social cognitive responsibility requires us to redress the moral wrongs of the past, arising from colonialism, racism, sexism, and classism, to make our institutions trustworthy for everyone [Hull 2022]. For given these wrongs, marginalized groups developed rational distrust in knowledge-providing institutions [Bunch 2021; Desmond 2022]. Finally, social cognitive responsibility underwrites a cognitive duty to collectively reimagine our relationship to the more-than-human world [cf. p. 22], which requires an ongoing exchange of reasons about issues like speciesism, factory farming, the destruction of habitats, and our conception of ‘the environment’ as mere background for human activity or non-human animals as resources [cf. p. 21].

Importantly for my argument, the practice of holding each other accountable for our beliefs, and so the concept of social cognitive responsibility, wasn’t invented by epistemologists. Rather, epistemologists carefully attend to the way actual responsibility practices function, which also reveals ideals about how they should function. Their general approach is in the spirit of Peter Strawson [1962: 5–6], who urges us to consider ‘the very great importance that we attach to the attitudes and intentions towards us of other human beings’, and to ‘think of the many different kinds of relationship which we can have with other people’ in order to understand responsibility. The idea is to start with actual practices – including intellectual ones – and actual relationships and the expectations and norms that are constitutive of these relationships – including relationships of epistemic dependence and the legitimate expectations on one another that arise within these
relationships. At the very least, these practices and relationships must be the starting ground for responsible theorizing about responsibility. Any revision or reconceptualization must come afterwards, based on an understanding of actual human practices and concepts of responsibility which are employed and defined by the way we use them within these practices.

There is common ground between a Strawsonian perspective that emphasizes attention to our actual practices and Celermajer’s call to reconceptualise responsibility. Importantly, the ‘our’ in ‘our practices’ must refer to shared human practices, rather than to pre-dominant Western responsibility practices. Celermajer [pp. 13-14] rightly takes an anticolonial perspective when drawing on frameworks offered by Indigenous philosophies, which offer fundamentally relational perspectives in a more-than-human world. Current mainstream epistemology must decolonize by taking seriously, for instance, perspectives from African epistemology [Ikhane and Ukpokolo 2023] when theorizing about cognitive responsibility. Anticolonial projects will call for revisions of widely held beliefs about responsibility. Yet they must keep the focus on a shared human concept to fix their object of study, while also exploring practices in its vicinity so as not to restrict their object by a Western preconception of what responsibility can include.

The concepts that are central to the practice of holding each other cognitively responsible are part of the conceptual scheme that we share as human beings in virtue of our dependence on each other, and the various relationships we form out of this basic dependence. Our problem is not that we lack the very concept of cognitive responsibility. Rather, this concept is obscured in various ways. It is likely obscured by the dominant liberal picture of responsibility that Celermajer mentions, which itself arises out of an individualistic and predominantly Western theorizing about responsibility. Importantly, this picture is the invention of theorists. For it doesn’t adequately capture all human responsibility practices.

Cognitive responsibility is also obscured by a widespread tendency to consider beliefs as mere private matters. As Donald Trump put it after being pressed on his belief that Barack Obama wiretapped him during the presidential campaigns, ‘I have my own opinions. You can have your own opinions’ [see Thrush and Davis 2017]. Trump’s labelling of his beliefs as ‘opinions’ is an attempt to classify them as something that need not be justified by evidence. Another example of obscuring cognitive responsibility is complaints about ‘cancel culture’ as soon as one’s beliefs and assertions are challenged. Since discussion and open exchange of arguments are central to democracy, such evasions of cognitive responsibility threaten it.
Celermajer envisages material changes of our relationships and practices to the more-than-human world. Arguably, this calls for a more radical departure from current conceptual frameworks than an exchange of reasons can achieve in short time. However, if epistemology precedes ethics (see section 2), then bringing about such material change presupposes cognitive change within the agents who are supposed to bring about the material change. Importantly, this can only be achieved step-by-step. Radical changes in our frameworks might ultimately be called for. However, we cannot see what form these changes should take without previously engaging in the intellectual tasks of attending to the diversity of our actual practices and without exchanging reasons. That is, the radical acts of imagination advocated by Celermajer help us to envisage new possibilities; yet whether we should adopt radically different frameworks can only be assessed on the basis of reasons as viewed from our current conceptual schemes.

Thus, I contend that we shouldn’t just jump to a revision of central ethical concepts. What we need to do instead is to bring them clearly to the surface, understand them fully by acknowledging how cognitive responsibility is involved in ethical questions, and encourage engagement in the practices where our concepts are firmly embedded. At the same time, epistemological investigation must consider Indigenous knowledge and responsibility practices as legitimate starting points for theorizing about responsibility, and more generally consider actual responsibility practices from traditions in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Australasia. This will involve inventing new and helpful concepts, as well as engineering other concepts that aren’t as central to our shared ethical and epistemological frameworks as the concept of responsibility.

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