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PART IV

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Abstract

What is it to take responsibility for a moral failure? This chapter investigates taking responsibility for wrongdoing. It starts by considering a prominent view in the literature: that to take responsibility for a wrong is to blame oneself for it. Contrary to the self-blame account, it is argued that taking responsibility and self-blame can come apart in various ways. Instead, the normative footprint account is defended. It is suggested that wrongdoing changes the normative landscape in systematic ways: it can create duties to apologize, to acknowledge the wrong done, to make amends, to respond to the wronged party's upset. To take responsibility for a wrong is to own the normative consequences of one's wrong.

Keywords

apology, blame, excuse, responsibility, wrongdoing

Taking Responsibility

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We would like people to live up to their obligations, moral and otherwise. But since our obligations are often demanding and we as creatures are fallible, even the most conscientious of us will occasionally fall short. We break promises, betray secrets, get into arguments, forget birthdays and appointments. Sometimes we do so unwittingly, or by accident, sometimes because we succumb to temptation. Whatever the explanation for our failure, when we do fail the right thing to do is to take responsibility.

What is it to take responsibility for a moral failure, wrongdoing, in particular? While philosophers have had plenty to say about holding others responsible, the phenomenon of *taking* responsibility has received comparatively little attention. This chapter investigates this question. I start by considering a prominent view in the literature: that to take responsibility for a wrong is to blame oneself for it. Contrary to the self-blame account, I argue that taking responsibility and self-blame can come apart in various ways.

Instead, I suggest that taking responsibility is a matter of owning the normative footprint of one's wrong. Wrongdoing changes the normative landscape in systematic ways: it can create duties to apologize, to acknowledge the wrong, to make amends, to feel bad. It can give the wronged party the right to feel resentment, to withdraw her trust, to give the wrongdoer the silent treatment. To take responsibility for a wrong is to own these normative consequences. This is the normative footprint account.

I chart the considerable advantages that the normative footprint account has over its competitors: it sheds light on why taking responsibility is incompatible with making excuses, it explains how we can take responsibility for wrongs done by others, and it vindicates the intuitive thought that agents who experience bad moral luck—such as Bernard Williams’s driver who blamelessly injures a child—can and ought to take responsibility for what they have done.

1. The Self-Blame Account

If we want to know what it is to take responsibility for a wrong, a natural starting point is the literature on holding responsible. For just as we can hold others responsible, we can hold ourselves responsible. Taking responsibility, one might suggest, is simply a matter of holding oneself responsible.

What is it to hold someone responsible? In a tremendously influential essay, Strawson suggests that to get a handle on holding each other responsible, we should pay attention to our reactive attitudes:

We should think of the many different kinds of relationship which we can have with other people – as sharers of a common interest; as members of the same family; as colleagues; as friends; as lovers; as chance parties to an enormous range of transactions and encounters. Then we should think, in each of these connections in turn, and in others, of the kind of importance we attach to the attitudes and intentions towards us of those who stand in these relationships to us, and of the kinds of *reactive* attitudes and feelings to which we ourselves are prone.

(Strawson, 2008/1974, p. 6)

Reactive attitudes express a distinctive kind of moral evaluation or appraisal that centres on those ‘attitudes and intentions’ manifested in actions: the agent’s quality of will, her regard (or lack thereof) for others, her good will towards us. To engage in these appraisals by experiencing reactive attitudes, such as blame or resentment, or by judging these reactive attitudes to be warranted just is to hold others responsible. We hold others responsible for transgressions by responding with blame and resentment.¹

We hold *others* responsible by blaming *them*. Thus, we hold *ourselves* responsible by blaming *ourselves*. That is to say, we engage in the corresponding self-directed moral appraisal expressed by a special set of first-personal reactive attitudes: guilt, remorse, shame.² As Wallace argues:

To hold myself responsible for a moral wrong, for example, it is sufficient that I should feel guilt about my violation of a moral obligation that I accept, or at least believe that that violation would make it fitting for me to feel guilt; these conditions could of course be satisfied without my expressing my guilt to myself or anyone else, and certainly without my sanctioning myself.

(Wallace, 1994, p. 67)

¹ Variants of this Strawsonian view are defended, among (many) others, by Wallace (1994), McKenna (2012), Shoemaker (2011; 2015), and Darwall (2006).

² On the connection between remorse and self-blame, see Fricker (2016), [COMP: please hyperlink] ‘... remorse entails self-blame. The remorseful wrongdoer must inevitably see herself as blameworthy.’

Similarly, Eleanor Mason argues that to take responsibility for a wrong is a matter of feeling remorse for the wrong done. Feeling remorse, in turn, involves not just feeling bad about what happened but ‘owning the action’: ‘in order to feel remorse, we just have to feel ownership of the act’ (Mason, 2018a, p. 252).

To take responsibility for a wrong or a failure is thus to blame oneself for it by experiencing the reactive attitude of guilt, remorse, or shame or by regarding such reactive attitudes as fitting. Call this the *self-blame account*.

The self-blame account has some attractive features. Blaming oneself and taking responsibility are connected phenomena. But the self-blame account does not get the nature of this connection quite right. It says that the connection between taking responsibility and self-blame is *constitutive*. You take responsibility for a wrong *by* coming to feel remorse (or guilt, or shame) for it (or believing these attitudes to be fitting). These reactive attitudes (or beliefs about their appropriateness) are both *necessary* and *sufficient* for taking responsibility.

This strikes me as mistaken. First, blaming oneself for a transgression is not necessary for taking responsibility for it. We can take responsibility without feeling remorse, guilt, or ownership of the action, and without regarding such reactive attitudes as being fitting. Suppose Eliza grabs a bottle of ketchup during a dinner at her parents-in-law, which is, as usual, a rather tight-lipped affair. Eliza is anxious to make a good impression. Her anxiety make her hands sweaty. When she grips the ketchup bottle, it slips and the ketchup pours out generously, narrowly missing her plate and landing on the starkly white tablecloth instead. Eliza apologizes profusely, running to get some dish cloths to clean up. And while she may feel a bit embarrassed about the whole affair, she is feeling neither guilty nor remorseful—nor does she take such feelings to be

appropriate. In fact, she may well regard the situation as comical and be inwardly amused at the drama. Or she may be relieved that at least the tension has been broken. Still, the absence of feelings of self-blame is compatible with her taking responsibility for making a mess.

Take another case. Suppose that there is a serious incident that breaches the code of conduct of an institution—for example, that one of the creepy Fellows at a Cambridge College is found to have behaved inappropriately towards a young PostDoc. As part of the disciplinary proceedings, Sara, the Master of the College, meets with the PostDoc. She acknowledges the badness of what happened and assures the PostDoc of her support. She tells the PostDoc that she takes the incident seriously and that she will make sure the disciplinary process is carried through fully and thoroughly. She apologizes on behalf of the College for letting the PostDoc down. She feels sympathy for and indignation on behalf of the PostDoc. But she does not feel guilt or remorse, nor does she regard those reactions to be apt. After all, it was not *Sara* who behaved badly. But the absence of those feelings do not, in any way, get in the way of her taking responsibility, as head of the institution, for what happened.

Eliza takes responsibility for ruining a tablecloth. Sara takes responsibility for inappropriate behaviour at the institution of which she is head. Yet neither case involves feelings of ownership, guilt, or remorse. Nor do such attitudes seem apt or fitting. It would be strange for Eliza to feel remorse for spoiling the tablecloth, given that this was a mishap. And it would be strange for Sara to be ridden with guilt or remorse, given that it was not her who harassed the PostDoc—it was someone employed by her College. This is to say: in cases like those two, the responsibility-taking would not be in any way improved if feelings of guilt, remorse, or ownership were involved. On the contrary, such feelings would seem out of place. Thus, contrary to the self-blame

account, reactive attitudes like remorse, guilt, or feelings of ownership are not necessary for taking responsibility.

A defender of the self-blame account might suggest that while Eliza and Sara are taking responsibility in a sense, they are not taking the *right kind* of responsibility. Thus, Elinor Mason distinguishes between responsibility and liability. To hold someone liable for an act is simply to judge that they are the ones who should pay compensation if the act has a bad outcome. To hold someone responsible, on the other hand, involves more than that: it involves reactive attitudes. Consequently, taking responsibility is a matter of self-blame, while taking liability just is acquiescence to being on the hook for compensation:

Taking responsibility is taking on something deeper than liability. It is engaging in the blame conversation in a sincere way. Someone who genuinely takes responsibility is willing to engage in the blame conversation ... Remorse is evidence of sincere engagement in the blame conversation by the blamee. This is why we want remorse when we blame people.

(Mason, 2019, p. 187)

The difference between taking responsibility and taking liability lies in the psychology of the agent:

When we feel responsible for an action, we must feel that it is our action, that we did it, that we own it. Feelings of remorse and so on are apt when the agent herself acts badly, but are not apt in regard to the actions of others. Thus we cannot take on responsibility for the actions of others. We can take on liability. Taking on

liability is just willingness to perform acts of recompense in the event of a bad outcome. It does not involve ownership, or the attendant feelings of remorse and so on.

(Mason, 2018b, p. 177)

To take responsibility is to feel guilty or remorseful for one's action—to take liability is merely to be willing to foot the bill for it: 'Taking on responsibility is more personal, more emotional, and more weighty than taking on liability' (ibid., p. 178). In defense of the self-blame account, Mason may thus suggest that Eliza and Sara merely take liability. In fact, in Sara's case, she cannot take responsibility for she didn't harass anyone.

There are reasons to be dissatisfied with this response. It claims that our ordinary talk of 'taking responsibility' is ambiguous between two distinct moral phenomena: proper, substantial taking responsibility, which involves affective engagement and something less substantial, consisting of mere willingness to compensate for another's harm. Thus, the suggestion is that when we say that Sara is 'taking responsibility' for the PostDoc's experiences at her institution, this is just attributing to her a taking of responsibility in the minimal sense.

The problem with this response is that if willingness to compensate was all there was to Sara's response, she would not be 'taking responsibility' in any sense. In fact, coolly offering the PostDoc some sum (even a large one!) to 'compensate' her for her experience would strike one as the very opposite on the part of the College Master: an attempt to make the problem disappear. If the PostDoc angrily refused such an offer, we would not be in the least surprised.

To be taking responsibility *in any sense* requires, among other things, emotional engagement. In Sara's case, this is a matter of validating the PostDoc's upset, sadness, and outrage—and

feeling sympathy for her situation. Being good at this emotional labour—being able to regulate one's emotions in line with the requirements of the situation—is (or at least, should be) part of the job description of the Master of a College.³ But it also requires action: investigating the incident, seeing to it that appropriate disciplinary action against the Fellow is taken. Similarly, in Eliza's case, if all there was to Eliza's response was a willingness to pay for a new tablecloth, we would be hesitant to say she is taking responsibility. To do the latter, she has to suppress her amusement, empathize with her parents-in-law's consternation, and offer an apology.

This suggests that there is no confusion or ambiguity when we say that Sara or Eliza take responsibility. We do not mean by it that they merely take liability, for taking liability is not a form of taking responsibility at all. We mean that they *take responsibility full stop*.

More generally, taking responsibility appears to be a unified moral phenomenon. In support of this, note that when we are told that a culprit has taken responsibility for their wrong, we may well ask *how* they have done so: have they apologized? Visited? Sent a card? Depending on the answer, we can debate about whether this is sufficient to say the culprit has taken responsibility. But it seems odd to respond to this declaration by asking *what kind* of responsibility they have taken. But if taking responsibility really was a disjunctive kind, there should be nothing odd about such a request for disambiguation.

As far as our moral practice is concerned, then, taking responsibility does not present as a disjunctive kind. All things being equal, we should prefer an account of taking responsibility that chimes with our moral practice, preserving its apparent unity. Such an account should make

³ The notion of emotional labour as the regulation of one's own emotions in line with the requirements of the job is due to [Hochschild \(2012/1983\)](#).

room for different manifestations of taking responsibility: it should allow that sometimes we take responsibility by blaming ourselves and sometimes we do so by doing other things.⁴

The self-blame account faces additional problems. There are also reasons to doubt that self-blame is *sufficient* for taking responsibility. To see this, consider a victim of sexual assault. When her friends went home, she decided to stay on the dance floor. The perpetrator took note of her vulnerable situation and attacked her as she was waiting for a cab. Suppose the victim blames herself for the attack: her dress was short, her drinks were many. She berates herself for not leaving with her friends. She *feels responsible* for what happened to her—for ‘getting herself assaulted’.

Has the victim thereby taken responsibility for her assault? The self-blame account seems to say *yes*. Insofar as the victim feels ownership over what happened to her, insofar as she feels guilty, she appears to have taken responsibility.

Cases like this raise a particular challenge for those defenders of the self-blame account who insist that by feeling remorse, we can *change the responsibility facts* in play. Mason, for example, has argued that ‘[o]ne *makes oneself responsible* by taking on responsibility’ (Mason, 2018a, p. 260). Taking on responsibility is ‘taking on blameworthiness’ (ibid., p.

⁴ Others have suggested that our notion of responsibility is ambiguous—or even multiply so—and have attempted to differentiate between different notions (or faces) of responsibility in various ways, for example, Watson (1996), Scanlon (1998), Young (2010), Shoemaker (2011), and Zheng (2016). My argument here is limited to Mason’s specific proposal, as discussing all the others would lead too far from the topic at hand. But I’m inclined to think that the point can be generalized: insofar as taking responsibility appears to be a unified moral phenomenon, this casts doubt on any view that purports to identify multiple senses of moral responsibility in our moral practice.

261). The self-blame account can allow that the victim *should not* take responsibility in this situation. But insofar as she has taken responsibility, she has made herself blameworthy for ‘getting herself assaulted’. This seems like a very unwelcome conclusion.

The self-blame account can block this unwelcome verdict by rowing back and conceding that feelings of remorse or guilt are not sufficient for taking responsibility, after all—other conditions must be in place. Most plausibly, the agent can only *take* responsibility when she *is*, in fact, responsible for the act or outcome in question. This, the self-blame account may argue, is what goes wrong in the case of the victim. She is feeling guilty when it is not fitting for her to feel guilty because she is not responsible for her assault.

The first problem with this response is that it commits the self-blame account to the view that we can only take responsibility for an action when it is fitting to feel guilt or remorse for that action. But we have seen earlier that this is an implausible claim—Sara takes responsibility for misconduct at her institution and Eliza takes responsibility for the stained tablecloth even though, in those cases, feelings of remorse and guilt were not merely absent but also uncalled for.

The second problem is that this concession cannot salvage the self-blame account. An agent can fail to take responsibility even when she feels guilt or remorse about an action and these feelings are fitting in light of what she has done.

Thus, consider John who promised his friend to come to her stand-up comedy performance. It’s the friend’s first performance in a bigger venue and she is feeling nervous about it. She is asking John to come for moral support: to have someone in the audience who is guaranteed to laugh at her jokes. On the evening of the performance, however, John does not really feel like going out. He’s had a tiring week, the night is cold and rainy and, to be honest, he does not enjoy

his friend's stand-up routine all that much (though he would never tell her that). A night on the couch seems very appealing. He deliberates about whether to go, procrastinating on coming to a decision until it is clear that he will not make it in time. He texts his friend to send his apologies. 'I'm so exhausted from the week, I can't really be expected to track across town just for 10 minutes of stand-up,' he tells himself. Deep down he feels guilty for breaking his promise and letting his friend down. This feeling puts him on edge and when his friend later expresses disappointment, he reacts angrily and defensively, arguing that it wasn't his fault he had a tough week and bringing up an unrelated incident from a long time ago, in which he felt she let him down.

John does feel guilty about what he has done—as he should, for he has broken a promise with no justification or excuse. And he knows that he should feel guilty—though he prefers not to admit it. It is *because* he feels guilty that he lashes out at her. But it would be wildly implausible to say that he is taking responsibility. Feelings of guilt and remorse—even when fitting—are not sufficient for taking responsibility.

The self-blame account draws too close a connection between *feeling* responsible and *taking* responsibility. It sees reactive attitudes as constitutive of—and hence both necessary and sufficient for—taking responsibility. I have argued that this is mistaken—feeling responsible and taking responsibility can and often do come apart. But this is not to say that there is no relationship between the two.

Looking back at the cases, I suggest that the relationship between feelings of guilt, remorse, or self-blame and taking responsibility is *causal*. We are not taking responsibility *by* feeling guilty or remorseful. Rather, we often take responsibility *because* we feel guilty. But these feelings are not infallible guides to whether we ought to take responsibility. This is, plausibly, what

goes wrong in the case of the victim: she tries to take responsibility because she feels guilty for what happened to her. Nor do they guarantee that the agent will take responsibility. To feel guilty is acutely unpleasant. Rather than prompting us to face up to one's shortcoming, we can simply try to make the feeling go away by denial, self-deception, or by making up excuses. This is what goes wrong in John's case.

So far, my arguments have been negative: I have argued that the self-blame account of taking responsibility is inadequate. In what follows, I turn to the positive project of developing an alternative account.

2. The Normative Footprint Account

I suggest that taking responsibility for a wrong is a matter of *owning the normative footprint* of the wrong. Wrongdoing changes the normative landscape; it gives rise to a range of duties and obligations, including the duty to apologize, explain, or make amends. To take responsibility for a wrong is *own* those normative changes: that is to recognize them and to commit to abide by them.⁵

This needs some unpacking. The idea of a normative landscape I am drawing on is familiar.⁶ We are all embedded in an intricate web of duties, rights, and permissions that connects us with one another and forms the fabric of our relationships. When we act in normatively significant ways, our actions reverberate through that web, rupturing, shifting, and readjusting it.

⁵ This section draws on ideas developed in Sliwa (2019b) and (2020).

⁶ See, in particular, Owens (2012).

Wrongdoing is normatively significant. We commit a wrong by performing an action that violates some duty we have or that infringes on someone's right. Wrongdoing changes the normative landscape in systematic and predictable ways. These changes fall in three categories:

1. Wrongdoing creates *reparatory duties/rights*: the duty to apologize, to make amends, to explain one's motives, to acknowledge the harm done, to compensate.
2. Wrongdoing changes *feeling rights/duties*: the right to feel upset, angry, disappointed with us, the duty to feel anguish, guilt, remorse, shame.
3. Wrongdoing modifies existing *relationship rights/duties*: the right to trust, help, support, good will.

Call the aggregate set of normative changes that result from a given wrong its normative *footprint*.⁷

Wrongdoing is not the only type of activity that reshapes the normative landscape in predictable and stable ways. Promising creates new promissory duties and creates corresponding claim-rights (Raz, 1990; Shiffrin 2008; Enoch, 2012; Owens, 2012). Having promised you a cake, I am now under the duty to make one. Consent waives certain duties and their corresponding rights (Dougherty, 2015; Tadros, 2016, chapter 11). Having consented to you touching my hair, I have granted you permission to touch it.

⁷ The idea of a normative footprint builds on the insight that wrongs leave a 'moral residue'. See Thomson (1990, pp. 84–98). Kramer (2005) defends the principle that breaching someone's right creates a directed moral duty to 'remedy the resultant situation in some way', where a moral remedy is 'a measure undertaken or undergone in order to acknowledge the wrongness of what one has done to somebody else, and in order to deal adequately with the resultant situation' (p. 313).

Many have argued that promises and consent are normative powers.⁸ To exercise a normative power is to change the normative landscape through an act of will aiming to bring about this change.⁹ Thus, normative powers are distinctive: they change the normative landscape in a particular way through the agent's intention to bring about this change. When I promise to make you a cake, I place myself under the obligation to make a cake because I intend for such an obligation to come about.

Wrongdoing is *not* a normative power. It's a mark of normative powers that they cannot be exercised unintentionally (Owens, 2012, p. 5; see also Enoch, 2011, p. 15). Because a successful promise requires an intention to create a promissory obligation and valid consent requires an intention to waive a right, neither can be given unintentionally. In contrast, wrongdoing can be and often is unintentional. Moral norms can be flouted unknowingly. Promises, hearts, and windows can be broken through inadvertence. And even when the wrongdoer breaks the moral law clear-sightedly, she does not (normally) intend to create a normative footprint—unlike the giver of a promise who intends to bring about a promissory obligation. For a wrongdoer, the normative changes she causes—the duty to apologize, to feel bad, to make amends—are (typically) unwelcome.

Thus, normative powers are not alone in changing the normative landscape in predictable and systematic ways. It is a constitutive feature of wrongdoing that it creates reparative rights and duties and induces specific changes to feeling and relationship rights and duties. That is to

⁸ There is a separate question about *what explains* the fact that normative powers can give rise to duties and obligations—a discussion into which I will not venture. See <IBT>Chang (2020</IBT>) for discussion.

⁹ Chang (ibid.) calls this a 'reflexive willing'.

say, it is *in virtue* of the wrong done, that these normative changes take place. Similarly, benefiting someone—helping them, supporting them, doing them a favour—also changes the normative landscape. It create duties of gratitude and reciprocity even when the benefiter may not intend to create such duties.

So much for the general idea of wrongdoing as an intervention in the normative landscape. Let's now think more carefully about the idea of a normative footprint. Above I have listed the broad outlines of the normative changes to which wrongdoing gives rise. The precise content and extent of those changes will depend on several factors: the nature and gravity of the wrong, its material consequences, the relationship against which it takes place, the presence of excuses (on this more later). These factors will influence the precise content of the reparative duties, the scope of changes to feeling rights and obligations, and relationship norms. Very grave wrongs—a betrayal by a close friend, an assault by a stranger—will typically modify the normative landscape extensively in all three ways: creating demanding reparatory duties, stringent feeling rights and upending relationship rights—for example, eliminating any entitlement to basic trust or good will on the part of the wrongdoer. Minor wrongs—a slight inconvenience, a small indiscretion—cut much less deeply: they create a duty to explain and apologize and may entitle the wronged party to a pang of annoyance, or the right to ignore a phone call. But such a minor wrong will not, typically, entitle the wronged party to a grand apology, seething resentment, or to terminate the friendship. Nor will they require the wrongdoer to grovel in remorse. The normative footprint of a wrong is the aggregate set of changes in the normative landscape to which it gives rise.

What is it to *own* a normative footprint? I suggest that owning a normative footprint is an attitude that the agent takes towards her normative footprint. To own the normative footprint of

one's wrong is to accept it, to see oneself as bound by it. This has both a cognitive and a motivational component. The cognitive component involves a grasp of the normative consequences in question—it's knowing that, for example, one has reparative duties and feeling duties, as well as knowing—at least roughly—their content. The conative requirement involves a motivation to comply with those duties: typically, this will be a matter of an intention or a commitment. Thus, to take responsibility for a broken promise is to know that one owes an explanation and apology for it and to commit to discharging those duties.

When we compare the self-blame account and the normative footprint account, we see that they disagree about the moral psychology of taking responsibility. According to the self-blame account, to take responsibility for a wrong is to *feel ownership of it*. In contrast, the normative footprint account says that to take responsibility for a wrong is to *own its normative consequences*, where this crucially involves a commitment to discharge the duties that result from it.

We can be motivated to discharge our obligations for their own sake, because it's the right thing to do. Or we can be motivated to do so for instrumental reasons, because failure to do so would jeopardize a valuable relationship or incur the disapproval of others. This resonates with the observation that while taking responsibility is generally a good thing, our reasons for taking responsibility can be self-serving and thus less than fully laudable.

You may question the nature of the cognitive state involved in owning the normative footprint: is it really *knowledge* that's required? Would belief not do? Knowledge has the advantage of being factive and so allows us to capture that taking responsibility is a success notion: you cannot take responsibility for a broken promise if no promise has been broken. For just as you cannot own a non-existent car, so you cannot own a non-existent normative footprint, although

you may falsely, and justifiably, believe yourself to own it. In such a case, you may try to take responsibility for a purported wrong and you may believe yourself to have taken it. But you are mistaken: taking responsibility is not always transparent.

This gives the normative footprint account an advantage over the self-blame account when it comes to the victim who blames herself for her assault. Recall that the self-blame account rendered an unpalatable verdict: by blaming herself—by feeling guilt for ‘getting herself assaulted’—the victim takes responsibility for her assault. She ‘makes herself blameworthy’ for it (Mason, 2018a, p. 260). The normative footprint account disagrees. The victim cannot take responsibility for the assault. For it was not she who committed a wrong. Thus, there is normative footprint *for her* to own. It’s the assailant who did; it is he who has thereby placed himself under a set of duties and obligations, some of which he owes to her. It is he who is under the obligation to feel remorse and guilt.

The normative footprint account also allows us to diagnose the mistake involved, assuming that the victim’s response has been shaped by the standard victim-blaming narrative. This narrative misrepresents the normative status of the victim’s actions. It paints having another drink, wearing a short dress, staying for another hour on the dance floor as impermissibly reckless. Thus, the assault is something that happened to the victim as a result of her recklessness, much as an accident happens to a driver who is speeding—rather than something done to her by a perpetrator. And so, much like the reckless driver, she has no right to complain or receive sympathy: she brought it on herself. Or so the victim-blaming narrative has it.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Manne (2018, pp. 223–8) for discussion of the moral narrative framing our notion of a victim—in particular, its requirement that a victim be blameless herself.

The normative footprint allows us to see how victim-blaming contributes to broader structural injustice, in addition to wronging the victim individually by depriving her of the moral remedies and support to which she is entitled. The normative footprint account exposes the victim-blaming narrative as *epistemically* pernicious. It obfuscates the normative landscape, misrepresenting the victim's actions as a moral transgression and thereby hiding the wrong done by the perpetrator. It misrepresents where the normative changes have taken place, who has normative footprints to reckon with. It thereby protects the perpetrator from facing up to the normative consequences of his actions. Thus, by being subject to victim-blaming, the victim is suffering an epistemic wrong—plausibly a species of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007).

3. Making Excuses

Recall John who broke his promise to attend his friend's comedy gig. John posed a challenge to the self-blame account for he felt guilty for renegeing on his promise. Yet this guilt made him react defensively, making various excuses for why he could not have been expected to come. Since he was making excuses, he was not taking responsibility—his private feelings of guilt and self-blame notwithstanding. One virtue of the normative footprint account is that it explains why making excuses is incompatible with taking responsibility.

To see what the story is, we have to take a step back and consider what it is *to offer an excuse*. The first thing to notice is that question of an excuse arises only when it appears that a wrong has been done: a norm violated, a right infringed, a duty flouted. A natural thought is that when we offer an excuse, we offer an alternative explanation of our conduct—alternative, that is,

to the default explanation that the wrongdoing resulted from insufficient concern for the norm in question, a lack of regard for others, or some other morally deficient attitude. This explanation is an excuse insofar as it succeeds in casting our wrongdoing in a different light. As Scanlon argues:

The excusing conditions most often appealed to in everyday life ... alter the character of the action that can be attributed ... In the light of these further facts, I can still correctly attribute the action to you, but it may no longer indicate a blameworthy attitude on your part, or at least not the same attitude: your action may have been hasty, but it was not ill-intended.

(1998, p. 297)

This natural thought is partly correct. Excuses, I have argued elsewhere, are considerations that tell us something about the moral quality of the agent's motivation.¹¹ But it not *entirely* correct. That's because there is a difference between explaining our conduct—including the motivations behind our wrongdoing and their moral quality—and offering an excuse for it. We can do the former while explicitly refraining from doing the latter, as when we say things like 'I'm so sorry I left you hanging. I was so exhausted I forgot all about it but I don't mean this as an excuse: I ought to have remembered.' The fact that utterances like these are coherent shows that explaining one's conduct and offering excuses for it are not the same thing.

What is the difference? The notion of a normative footprint provides the missing puzzle piece. For it spells out what an excuse *does*. Wrongdoing leaves a normative footprint. Excuses

¹¹ Sliwa (2019a) develops a detailed account of excuses.

bear on the size and nature of this normative footprint: they are normative difference-makers.¹² That is to say, the presence of an excuse makes the size of a normative footprint smaller than it otherwise would have been. Excuses vary in strength—they can excuse to a greater or lesser degree. The nature and extent of the normative changes precipitated by wrongdoing thus depend not just on the nature and gravity of the wrong but also on the presence of excuses. The fact that a wrongdoer acted under duress or was provoked does not make her action any less of a wrong but it does make a difference to how we are entitled to feel about her wrongdoing, what kind of reparative actions she owes, and whether she is still entitled to our good will, gossip, or dinner party invitation.

When offering excuses we are not just providing further information about our wrongdoing and our motivations for it. We are doing so with the aim of mitigating the normative fallout of our wrong. In other words: to offer excuses is not merely to *assert* something but to *negotiate*. In offering an excuse, we are not merely trying to change the other party's mind about our motivation or circumstances of our wrongdoing but about its normative consequences: what kind of apology we owe, whether compensation is required, what kind of attitude others are entitled to take towards us. We are negotiating about the size of its normative footprint. Excuses are normative difference-makers and to offer an excuse is to try to leverage their difference-making power.

Thus, we can see why excusing one's conduct and taking responsibility for it are opposed to one another. For they involve incompatible attitudes towards the normative consequences of one's wrongdoing. Taking responsibility, I have said, is to own the normative footprint of one's wrongdoing. It involves recognizing the changes to the normative landscape that have ensued

¹² See Sliwa (2020) for more detailed discussion of excuses as normative difference-makers.

and to commit to the duties involved. The person taking responsibility sees the question of which normative changes have taken place as settled and commits to acting in light of them. In contrast, the person who engages in negotiations about the normative footprint must regard this question as open, as something that can be contested. Taking responsibility and offering excuses are opposed to one another because they involve two incompatible attitudes towards the normative footprint.

This fits well with *how* we offer explanations versus excuses. In general, when I am accused of a wrong and, in response, I explain my actions, the default is to interpret my contribution as a negotiating move: an attempt to minimize the normative fallout of the wrong. Thus, when my friend disapprovingly says: ‘I have been waiting for you’, as I appear half an hour late to our coffee date and I launch into a long explanation about how I meant to leave on time but then my bike key was nowhere to be found, it is natural to take this as an attempt to play defence and to persuade my friend that she is not entitled to be quite so mad at me. If playing defence is not what I intend, I have to signal this, either explicitly by adding, ‘Of course, that’s no excuse,’ or through the right tone and body language (typically one signalling contrition). What’s the point of offering an explanation when no excuse is intended? Recall that the duty to explain ourselves is often among the reparative duties created by wrongdoing. Plausibly, when I leave my friend hanging for half an hour, I owe it to her to explain myself.

The normative footprint account also sheds light on the ethics of excuses. Since to offer an excuse is to negotiate, excusing can go wrong in all the ways negotiating can go wrong. Negotiating about the normative consequences of one’s wrong can be disrespectful, pointless, or a waste of time. If my wrong is very grave and my excuse very weak, it’s best not to bother and to

get on with my reparative duties instead. For in delaying an apology to plead my case, I may be simply adding further distress to the person I have wronged. Equally, when my offence is very minor (I had promised to take the rubbish out on the way to work and then promptly forgot), it may be a waste of housemates' time to launch into detailed explorations of my state of mind as I was leaving the house. Better to just take out the rubbish, apologize, and promise to remember next time. Negotiations can also go wrong when the tone in which they are conducted is off: there can be a fine line between persuading and bullying or manipulating.

Finally, we can now see why excuses have such a bad name: to say that someone is 'making excuses' is typically not a compliment. Someone is 'making excuses' when she is stubbornly refusing to take responsibility at all cost. Such a person is not negotiating in good faith. She may be putting forward considerations that do not in fact excuse—that are irrelevant to the normative footprint of the wrong. She may be trying to deflect the blame onto others. She may be trying to minimize the gravity of her wrongdoing. Digging in, in this way, gets in the way of reckoning with the normative changes brought about by her wrongdoing—it gets in the way of apologizing, acknowledging the harm done, making amends. Making excuses thus adds insult to injury: it constitutes a new wrong—the wrong of failing in one's reparative duties, feeling duties, etc.—with its own normative footprint.

This sheds light on what is so problematic about John's behaviour. First, despite feeling guilty, John is refusing to own up to the fact that he owes his friend an acknowledgement that he acted selfishly and an apology. Instead, he argues about the normative fallout of his actions. Second, his arguments and negotiations are in bad faith: the facts he cites have no bearing on the normative footprint in question.

4. Taking Responsibility for Others

Sometimes we take responsibility for the failings of others. A parent may take responsibility for an act of vandalism committed by his teenage son. Or, as we saw earlier, the Master of a College may take responsibility for misconduct by a member of her institution. These examples caused trouble for the self-blame account because they illustrate that taking responsibility and feeling ownership, guilt, or remorse come apart. The normative footprint account explains how we can take responsibility for the actions of others.

Crucially, taking responsibility for wrongs done by others is *not* a matter of ‘taking over’ their normative footprint. You cannot own a normative footprint that is not yours. It’s the teenager, not the parent, who has vandalized the neighbour’s garage door. And so, it’s the teenager who is now, as a result, under the duty to apologize, to explain, to make amends, to feel guilty, and who has jettisoned his right to neighbourly good will. The parent cannot simply ‘take over’ the normative consequences of the son’s actions. In fact, if the parent attempted to ‘take over’ his son’s normative footprint—by apologizing to the neighbour, paying for the damage, and expecting nothing further of his son—this would be a moral failure on the part of the parent. Instead of taking responsibility, the parent would be trying to bail out the kid, shielding him from the normative consequences of his actions. Taking responsibility for the action of one’s child is not taking responsibility in the child’s stead.

Similarly, it’s the Fellow, not the Master of the College, who has breached the code of conduct. And so, it’s the Fellow who now has the duty to apologize and to resign. It would be bizarre for the Master of the College to step down, while letting the creepy Fellow off the hook. In doing

so, Sarah would be abnegating her responsibilities as the head of her institution, rather than taking responsibility for the misconduct of one of her employees.

When we take responsibility for the misconduct of others, we own *our* part of the normative changes that result from *their* wrongdoing. The normative changes induced by wrongdoing ripple outwards—they affect not just the duties and rights of wrongdoer and wronged party but have repercussions for the duties and rights of those who stand in certain relationships to the wrongdoer: their colleagues, their loved ones, or those who benefit from their wrongdoing.

Thus, the teenage son's act of vandalism constitutes a wrong and leaves the teenage son with a duty to apologize, to repair the damage, the duty to feel bad while forfeiting his right to the neighbour's trust or general good will. It's for the son to own those normative changes. But the teenager's wrongdoing also creates duties for the parent. For one of the parental obligations is to see to it that one's child takes responsibility and to support the child in doing so. It is to hold the child accountable. To take responsibility as a parent in such a situation is to own *those duties*: the duty to help the teenager recognize the normative consequences of his actions, the duty to encourage him to discharge his reparative duties and to make amends. Depending on the circumstances, this can be a matter of insisting that the teenager apologizes and cleans up, advancing the funds to pay for cleaning, or having a long conversation to get the teenager to understand the neighbour's upset and to feel remorse.

The same is true of the Master taking responsibility for the incident at her College. As the head of her institution, any misconduct at the College has implications for *her* obligations. It gives rise to duties to investigate what happened, to initiate and oversee a disciplinary process, and to examine existing rules to see if they need strengthening. It also creates the obligation to

acknowledge when there are missteps and to deal with their emotional fallouts. Importantly, as head of institution, it is part of her obligation to hold accountable those who are employed by it—that is, to make sure that they discharge *their* reparative obligations.

In both of the examples above, the party taking responsibility for the wrong done by another stands in a relationship of authority to them—parental authority, or institutional authority. In both cases, it's *in virtue of* this relationship of authority that the wrongdoer's actions give rise to the particular obligations for the other party that they do. But another party's wrongdoing can bear on our obligations and duties even when we are not their parent or superior. A friend's or spouse's wrongdoing can oblige us to take a stand—to try to talk sense into them, or to show our solidarity with the wronged party. Or we may be obliged to take reparative action in virtue of being the beneficiary from wrongdoing (including historical injustice) done by others (Butt, 2007).

Taking responsibility for wrongs done by others is thus not a matter of 'taking on' *their* normative footprint. Rather, it's a matter of owning the consequences their wrongdoing has for *our* duties and obligations.¹³

5. Moral Luck

Consider Bernard Williams's morally unlucky driver.¹⁴ His brakes are checked, his speed comfortably under the speed limit, he is sober, well-rested and alert, when he turns a corner and a child runs out into the street. Despite swerving and hitting the brakes immediately, he injures the

¹³ Taking responsibility is thus different from 'taking the blame' for someone—where we pretend to have been the culprit in order to shield the real culprit from the consequences of their action.

¹⁴ Williams (1981).

child. It seems desirable for the driver to take responsibility for the accident: to apologize to the parents, to check up on the child, to feel bad about it. Yet, it has struck many as plausible that the driver has not done anything wrong—he was just unlucky. Thus, as Nagel puts it: ‘It seems irrational to take or dispense credit or blame for matters over which a person has no control, or for their influence on results over which he has partial control’ (2012, p. 28).

Enoch argues that cases of moral luck are instances of ‘penumbral agency’: ‘In ... cases of penumbral agency we have independent reasons—having to do with the control condition on moral responsibility, mostly—not to assign full-blooded moral responsibility for the relevant action or event’ (Enoch, 2012, p. 101).

To accommodate that agents can take moral responsibility in such cases, Enoch suggests that we should think of taking responsibility as akin to a normative power: it involves extending one’s sphere of responsibility by *creating* obligations that weren’t antecedently there:

By taking responsibility for X, I place myself under the obligation to justify X (or the relevant X-related thing), or to offer an excuse for it, or to apologize for it, or to explain it, or something of this sort.

(ibid., p. 119)

Enoch explicitly models taking responsibility on making a promise:

This is the way in which taking responsibility is analogous not to acknowledging a duty that is already there independently of the acknowledging, but rather to undertaking a duty (or obligation, or commitment). In this sense, when I take re-

sponsibility for something—and when the other necessary conditions are in place
—I thereby become responsible.

(*ibid.*, p. 105)¹⁵

Call this the *normative power account* of taking responsibility.

The normative power account tries to have its cake and eat it. It rejects the existence of moral luck and hence denies that the unlucky driver is morally responsible for any wrongdoing. At the same time, it wants to vindicate our intuition that the driver ought to apologize and engage in moral repair. The challenge is to explain why this is morally desirable. The normative power account suggests that just as we can sometimes be morally required to make a promise, in cases of penumbral agency, agents are morally required to take responsibility: ‘... in all these cases [of penumbral agency] you are plausibly morally required to take responsibility, where this taking makes a difference to the responsibility facts’ (*ibid.*, p. 101).

I don’t think that the normative power account can deliver what it promises to do. It does not succeed in vindicating our intuitive condemnation of the callous unlucky driver, who simply shrugs off the accident. Nor does it succeed in avoiding a commitment to moral luck.

To see why it fails with regards to the former, we have to unpack some of the normative structure it posits. The normative power account does not say that, in virtue of the tragic accident, the unlucky driver is under the obligation to reach out to the family, to make amends, to

¹⁵ Similarly, Mason (2018a) [COMP: please hyperlink] argues: ‘By taking responsibility we can extend the sphere of our responsible agency, for example to include inadvertent action or action on implicit bias. Taking on responsibility is “taking on blameworthiness”’ (p. 266) and ‘One *makes oneself responsible* by taking on responsibility’ (p. 260).

apologize. It insists that since the driver bears no moral responsibility for the accident, he is under no such obligations. But, he does have the obligation to *voluntarily take on those obligations* by exercising his normative power.

But when we condemn the callous driver, we do not condemn him for failing to exercise a normative power to undertake the duty to apologize. We condemn him for *failing to apologize*. Similarly, suppose you promise to pick your friend up from the station but get caught in a freak thunderstorm on the highway and, despite flawless time-management, you arrive late. Enoch says you do not owe your friend an explanation, nor an apology. If you fail to provide one, your friend has no cause for complaint. What they can complain about is that you did not create the obligation to apologize and explain. This is wildly implausible. The normative power account also fails to account for the affective fallout—for we do not merely condemn the callous driver for failing to apologize. We also condemn him for being emotionally unperturbed.

Second, the proposal does not succeed in eschewing the existence of moral luck either. This is because it offers no explanation for *why* the unlucky driver is obligated to exercise the normative duty to create an obligation to apologize in the absence of moral responsibility. What grounds the moral pressure on him to take responsibility if he is no more morally responsible than the bystanders or the child's parents? And why is there no such moral pressure on the lucky driver, who successfully swerves to avoid the accident?

The normative footprint has the resources to tell a more plausible story here. It can say that the driver should take responsibility for he is morally responsible. In injuring the child, he has done a wrong. Since he has done a wrong, there is a normative footprint for him to contend with. To take responsibility, for him, is simply to own this normative footprint.

How could he have done a wrong, you might object, if he has conducted himself impeccably in the lead-up to the accident? After all, we have stipulated that he is sober, well-rested, and alert, brakes checked, his speed well within the speed limit. The normative footprint account agrees that these features of the case matter: they make it the case that the driver was neither negligent nor reckless in injuring the child. Still, in injuring it, he has violated a moral duty of his. For our duty is not merely to refrain from injuring each other intentionally, through negligence, or recklessness. We have a duty not to injure *full stop*.¹⁶

By violating this duty, the unlucky driver has done a wrong: he wronged the child and he wronged its family. And so, he owes it to the child and to its family to acknowledge the harm done, to apologize, to inquire after the child's recovery or to respect the family's wishes if they do not want to hear from him. He is obligated to feel bad for the injury he has caused. To take responsibility for having injured the child is for him to own this normative footprint. The callous unlucky driver fails to discharge these moral obligations.

In saying this, the normative footprint endorses the existence of moral luck. But it's worth paying close attention to just what exactly this endorsement comes to. It comes to the claim that we can incur moral obligations and create rights unintentionally and sometimes unwittingly. The normative consequences of our actions are beyond our control. But this should not be controversial. We often acquire duties and rights simply because we happen to be at the right (or wrong, as the case may be) place at the right (or wrong) time. I can acquire the obligation to do CPR on a

¹⁶ See [Kramer \(2005\)](#) for more discussion. [Tannenbaum \(2015\)](#) takes a different approach to these cases.

She suggests that these are not cases of violated obligation but of 'mere moral failures', which also call for apology and repair. See also [Tannenbaum \(2018\)](#).

stranger because I happen to be nearby when he suffers a heart attack. I can acquire the obligation to support a distant relative in virtue of winning the lottery.¹⁷

From this endorsement of moral luck, however, it does not follow that we are entitled to blame the unlucky driver by resenting him, reproaching him, feeling anger towards him, or shunning him. Such feelings are permissible in response to the reckless or negligent driver or— even more so—the murderous driver who hit the child intentionally. In contrast, the unlucky driver's bad moral luck furnishes him with an excuse: he injured the child unintentionally and was neither negligent nor reckless. In this way, his being unlucky *mitigates* his normative footprint without absolving him from it. Thus, he is obliged to feel bad but, unlike the reckless or negligent driver, he is not required to be consumed with guilt and remorse.¹⁸

The normative footprint account thus vindicates the intuition that morally unlucky agents ought to take responsibility. Moreover, it explains why this is so: it's because all wrongdoing, including unintentional, unlucky wrongdoing, leaves some normative footprint. Just as our actions often have unexpected and surprising material consequences, they can have normative consequences beyond what we intended and foresaw.

6. A Nameless Virtue?

¹⁷ Note also that, despite its disavowals of moral luck, Enoch's normative power account has to endorse something similar: for he too, claims that the unlucky driver and the lucky driver differ in what their moral obligations are. Only the unlucky driver has the obligation to exercise his normative power of taking responsibility.

¹⁸ See [Sliwa \(2019a\)](#) and Sliwa (2020) for an argument that in cases of moral luck excuses merely mitigate, as opposed to extinguishing, the normative footprint.

Susan Wolf suggests that there is a nameless virtue associated with taking responsibility and that cases of moral luck are an ‘occasion for the one agent to display his (nameless) virtue or lack of it’ (Wolf, 2001, p. 14). She argues:

It is, regrettably, a virtue with no name, and I am at a loss to suggest a name that would be helpful. It involves living with an expectation and a willingness to be held accountable for what one does, understanding the scope of “what one does,” particularly when costs are involved, in an expansive rather than a narrow way. It is the virtue that would lead one to offer to pay for the vase that one broke even if one’s fault in the incident was uncertain; the virtue that would lead one to apologize, rather than get defensive, if one unwittingly offended someone or hurt him ... Like other virtues, this is a matter of offering the right amount (whether it be of compensation, apology, or guilt) at the right time to the right person in the right way.

(ibid., p. 13)

The normative footprint account brings the contours of this virtue into sharper focus. A central component is the capacity to locate oneself within the normative landscape and to discern how our actions have changed it. To take responsibility we need to both recognize that we have done wrong and discern how our wrongdoing has reshaped the normative landscape. This is a kind of moral knowledge that calls for being attuned to the specifics of the situation at hand: the context of the wrong, the relationships in play. Another component is motivational: the commitment to do the right thing, discharging our obligations. A third component is affective: it requires the

ability to conform one's feelings to the requirements of the situation, in particular, to regulate our emotions, refraining from defensiveness or from wallowing in self-pity.

As for Wolf's loss as to how to name the virtue in question, I'd suggest naming it: being responsible. Being a responsible person is to know when and how to take responsibility when one has fallen short in some way.

7. Conclusion

When we err morally, the right thing to do is to take responsibility. I have argued that to take responsibility for a wrong is to own its normative footprint: the changes in duties and rights induced by wrongdoing. These changes include the creation of reparative duties, for example, the duty to apologize, explain, make amends, changes to feeling rights and duties, for example, the duty to feel guilt or remorse, the right to resentment, and changes to relationship rights and duties, for example, the forfeiture of the right to trust, good will, or a phone call. To take responsibility for one's wrong is to own its normative footprint. I have argued that the normative footprint account is superior to two alternatives—the self-blame account and the normative power account. It sheds light on the connection between taking responsibility and making excuses, elucidates how we can take responsibility for wrongs done by others, and both vindicates and explains the thought that taking responsibility in situations of bad moral luck is a good thing.

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