

Review of *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility, Volume 6*  
Forthcoming in *Journal of Moral Philosophy*. Author: Daniel Story

Shoemaker, David (Ed.), *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility, Volume 6*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 293 pages, ISBN: 978-0-19-884553-9 (hbk.).  
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OSAR 6 is an impressive collection of eleven essays, most of which are focused on issues in ethics relating to agency, and all of which are relevant to important ethical questions. Given this focus, the volume as a whole is likely to be of interest mainly to philosophers working in ethics (although this is not true of every essay). It is a must-read for philosophers working on moral responsibility or similar issues.

Each of the essays in the volume is sophisticated, entrenched in the relevant literature, and deserving of careful attention by specialists. A good number defend bold or surprising claims whose significance can be appreciated by minimally informed readers. A few are more in the weeds and, while pertinent to specific literatures or debates, of more limited interest.

Nine of the essays in the volume are about responsibility or associated topics. Some concern very fundamental issues. Michael Moore (“Contemporary Neuroscience’s Epiphenomenal Challenge”) tackles neuroscience-based epiphenomenalist challenges to moral responsibility. Moore argues that even if our choices are epiphenomenal with our actions, we can be responsible for intended actions that are caused by neurological events that are themselves strongly necessitated by our subsequent choices. August Gorman (“The Minimal Approval Account of Attributability”) develops an account of attributability, arguing that an action is attributable to an agent iff the mental states that produce it, along with other states, ensure that the agent would give some reflective weight to the action’s effective motivation (and not merely because doing so would eliminate the motivation). This implies that ambivalence, akrasia, and emotion are not necessarily disqualifications for attributability.

Most essays have a narrower focus. Elinor Mason (“Between Strict Liability and Blameworthy Quality of Will: Taking Responsibility”) writes about blameworthiness for inadvertent bad acts, e.g. bad acts caused by faultless cognitive glitches. Mason argues that proper concern for our loved ones and investment in our duties to them sometimes require us to remorsefully take responsibility for inadvertently failing to fulfill these duties. Matt King (“Skepticism about the Standing to Blame”) argues that the appropriateness of blame is governed by the reasons we have to attend to things. Meddlesome and hypocritical blamers go wrong not because they lack standing to blame but because they attend to something they should ignore or mix up their priorities. Timmerman and Swenson (“How to Be an Actualist and Blame People”) wade into the actualism/possibilism debate in ethics. They note that actualists seem to have problems accommodating some important intuitions about blameworthiness and propose several potential responses on their behalf.

A few essays deal directly with accountability or attributability responsibility. Andreas Carlsson (“Shame and Attributability”) seeks to explain why accountability blameworthiness but

not attributability blameworthiness is constrained by a control condition. For Carlsson, this is because accountability blameworthiness is a matter of whether an agent deserves to feel guilty, and desert implies control, whereas attributability blameworthiness is about whether shame would be fitting, and fittingness does not imply control. Angela Smith (“Who’s Afraid of a Little Resentment?”) challenges the prevailing belief that incorrigible and incompetent wrongdoers are inappropriate targets of accountability blame, arguing that accountability blame functions not as a sanction or to elicit guilt but to protest the violation of a victim’s moral standing. Thus, agents who can understand such protest, including some incorrigible and incompetent wrongdoers, are appropriate targets of it. Douglas Portmore (“Control, Attitudes, and Accountability”) argues that agents are accountable for their reason-responsive attitudes (despite lacking volitional control over them) because these attitudes depend upon the exercise of agents’ rational capacities.

Two standouts *vis-à-vis* content are essays about moral testimony and self-control. Elizabeth Harman (“Moral Testimony Goes Only So Far”) reveals a tension between denying that false moral beliefs are exculpatory and affirming that testimony can produce moral knowledge. To resolve this tension, Harman proposes that testimony cannot lead to false justified moral belief, since a person’s total evidence never licenses the acceptance of false moral testimony. Kennett and Wolfendale (“Self-Control and Moral Security”) discuss the importance of moral security (the feeling that one’s welfare and interests are properly recognized by others) for normative self-control, i.e. the ability to shape one’s life according to one’s values. In their discussion, the authors describe how the deleterious effects of racism and neo-liberal narratives about poverty on moral security undermine normative self-control.

Although all the essays in the volume are thought-provoking, there is not space here for critical attention to each. The rest of this review critically examines one essay in the volume, which concerns directions and shared responsibility.

Eric Wiland (“(En)joining Others”) argues that when directors direct compliant directees during a joint activity, it can often be said that the directed action is something the director and directee do together and hence are jointly morally responsible for. Wiland observes that in such situations the directed action is typically done for the sake of the joint activity. Moreover, the director can know this in the distinctive non-observational, non-inferential way that one knows about one’s own actions. This suggests that in some sense the director joins the directee in acting. For example, suppose you and I are jointly rescuing someone from a burning house. The house smells of gas, so you direct me to shut off the gas. I comply. In this scenario, you know without observation or inference why I am shutting off the gas: ultimately, to rescue someone. And your special knowledge about the teleological connection between my action and our joint activity suggests that *we* are shutting off the valve. This explains why *we* are morally responsible for the action.

Wiland’s argument is compelling. However, it raises some issues which call into question the role of joint agency in explaining why directors share responsibility for directed actions.

The first concerns directed actions that are necessarily done alone. For example, suppose you and I are jointly reviewing a prison’s policies, and you direct me to spend time in solitary

confinement so that we can better understand its psychological effects. You know without inference or observation that I am spending time in solitary to facilitate our review. You share responsibility for my action. But it is contradictory to say that *we* are spending time in solitary together. What then explains your responsibility?

The second issue concerns directions occurring outside joint activity. Wiland could maintain that directors become linked with directed actions only when those directed actions are rationalized by something director and directee are doing together. But directors also direct directees with whom they are not obviously doing anything. And sometimes in these circumstances directors seemingly share responsibility for directees' actions. For example, suppose you see police mistreating someone on an empty street. You realize if the street were busy, the mistreatment would stop. So, you direct drivers to take a detour which includes the street. Fortunately, the accommodating drivers unquestioningly follow your directions. Intuitively, you are responsible for the drivers driving on the street. But you do not seem to be doing anything together with the drivers. This suggests directors and directees need not be acting jointly for shared responsibility to occur. What explains shared responsibility in these cases?

Here is a thought. One thing that distinguishes my actions from events that are not my actions is that the former but not the latter are guided and sustained by my intentions. When I shoot an arrow, the bowstring pull is my action, since that movement is guided and sustained by my intention to pull. But the arrow's flight, despite being an intended effect of my action, is not my action, since once that event starts my intentions do not explain why it unfolds as it does. After I let go, the arrow flies regardless of what my intentions are.

Notably, directors do not relate to directed actions in the way I relate to the arrow's flight. The director's intentionality guides and sustains the directed action via the directee's agency. Accordingly, the directed action is a manifestation of the director's intentionality, specifically the designs expressed in the direction. When you direct an accommodating driver to take such-and-such detour, your intentionality plays a direct role in explaining why the driver drives as she does. The driver takes this left and that right because she is implementing your expressed design for her.

This explains directors' knowledge about directed actions. You know why the driver is taking the detour because that action is a manifestation of your intentionality. It also explains why you share responsibility for that action: it is your design materializing in the world. Nevertheless, it does not follow that you and the directee are doing anything together. Perhaps, then, we need not appeal to joint agency to explain why directors share responsibility for directed actions, even if in some cases joint agency is an important part of the story linking director, directee, and directed action.

This brief note represents a tiny fraction of the critical attention that will undoubtedly be directed at this fecund volume for years to come. I for one will be following this attention with interest.

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