

The Origins of Responsibility. By François Raffoul. (Indiana UP, 2010. Pp. xiv + 341.)

Published in *Philosophical Quarterly* 62 (246):217-220 (2012)

The locution ‘A is responsible for x’ seemingly has two radically different meanings. On the traditional account, we are responsible for our actions and omissions, the consequences that ensue from them, and so on. Although this view of responsibility is often understood in causal terms, many accounts that reject any causal theory of action, such as Sartre’s, are united by the view that responsibility rests on *authorship*: we are responsible for what we author. Let’s call this the ‘accountability’ view. But we sometimes also say, for example, that people are responsible for their children, and here we mean not only that they are responsible for what their children do but also, and more commonly, that they are responsible for their children’s upbringing, that they are responsible *to* their children, and thus their responsibility rests not on their own activity but on their response to something external to their will. Let’s call this sense of responsibility ‘expropriability’. It is tempting to think that the relation between these two senses of responsibility is one of homonymy. Raffoul’s central claim is that this temptation should be resisted: not only are both legitimate accounts of responsibility, but the latter takes priority over the former.

This is a succinct and not entirely faithful way of characterizing Raffoul’s project, in part because he ultimately defends a third sense of responsibility. Raffoul first attempts to show that the notion of responsibility as accountability is an ‘unphenomenological’ construct that must give way to the second sense, on which responsibility is not a matter of freedom or the activity of the self, but involves instead a response to the demands of the Other. This Levinasian sense of responsibility, on which the subject is held hostage to and expropriated by the Other, also comes in for criticism, however. As Raffoul argues, expropriation inverts the traditional role of subjectivity in responsibility without challenging the concept itself. What we need is a new sense of responsibility, ‘ex-appropriability’, on which responsibility is ‘*the appropriation of the inappropriable, as inappropriable*’ (p. 267). Here, responsibility involves a response to something, an event of being or an event of the other, but subjectivity is neither presupposed nor inverted; it is, rather, constituted in the response itself. Instead of grounding responsibility in a subject with absolute authorship, or a subject always responsible by virtue of being beholden to the Other, we now have a subject that first becomes a self, and is constituted, by virtue of its response to an inappropriable event outside the domain of its power.

Raffoul’s aim, then, is to show that responsibility originates in something outside the subject’s power over itself, in fact in something prior to subjectivity. His secondary aim is to demonstrate that this view of responsibility emerges from a persistent concern with ethics within continental philosophy. He pursues both tasks by tracing the development of the notion of responsibility via chapters on several historical figures, capped by 20th century continental (mostly francophone—Dastur and Nancy are the most widely referenced authors in the monograph apart from its primary subjects) thought. In this story, Aristotle takes responsibility to depend on the voluntary, and then extends the domain of the voluntary to make us responsible for a good deal of seemingly involuntary action. Kant in turn radicalizes this view, making the voluntary depend on the free, self-legislated activity of a transcendental subject outside the phenomenal world. Nietzsche attacks this view as a construct designed to serve the needs of control and punishment, opening (perhaps inadvertently) the way for a new account of responsibility based on our need to create new values in light of the death of God. Sartre thus turns this directive to create new values into the act of a radically free, self-creating ego, only to find the account inverted in Levinas, for whom responsibility to the Other necessarily precedes any exercise of power. Finally, Heidegger locates responsibility in the response to the event of Being, where the self is constituted by its thrownness into the world and all that goes with it, including a relation to the other. This theme is then elaborated by Derrida, for whom we are responsible only for something that is not yet decided—something unpredictable and thus inappropriable—locating responsibility in openness to a futural event.

This book serves as a welcome addition to the growing literature on free will and responsibility by laying out a neglected continental take on the topic. Raffoul presents us, moreover, with interesting readings emerging from his previous work on facticity, a critique of the common view that Sartre values good faith over bad faith, and a valuable explication of hyperbolic ethics, on which ‘the subject is open to an other which is greater than itself’ (p. 179). The chapters on Aristotle and Kant, on the other hand, add little for those already familiar with the primary texts. Raffoul here eschews secondary sources, and sticks largely to summary. The chapters on Nietzsche and Sartre are more original, but rely to a surprising extent on ‘On Truth and Lie’ and ‘Existentialism is a Humanism,’ respectively, often broaching the thinkers’ more developed discussions only to provide further explication. The chapters on Heidegger and Derrida, on the other hand, are far more dense, displaying Raffoul’s deep familiarity with these thinkers, but those uninitiated into a distinctive francophone style of philosophizing will find them tough, if often enlightening, reading. Perhaps the strongest chapter of the book is the one dealing with Levinas; this is, interestingly, also the only chapter that features a significant amount of argumentation.

Raffoul’s overall strategy also raises some questions. First, he rests his case against the accountability view largely on Nietzsche’s critique of responsibility as a construct, which he presents without offering any defense of it, leaving the reader to decide whether or not to endorse perspectivism. Raffoul does offer other arguments—from Nietzsche, Levinas, and Derrida, for example—to the effect that responsibility always rests on irresponsibility and is aimed at an inappropiable decision. But these arguments themselves are left unanalyzed and are often presented with an unhelpful veneer of paradox, leaving it far from certain that they cannot yet be made compatible with accountability.

Finally, it is unclear how Raffoul’s stated aims, which involve uncovering both the origin and a new conception of responsibility, fit together. In searching for the origins of responsibility, we are looking for the explanans; at this point, the explanandum may remain conceptually unaltered. It is of course possible that, once we have the explanans firmly in place, this may require a change in the explanandum; indeed, Raffoul seems to be seeking just such a revisionist account. But he gives no indication of *why*. After all, should he be right—should it turn out that the explanans of responsibility involves an openness to the event as inappropiable—it is not clear that the notion of responsibility itself requires revision, or what such a revision might involve. The Heideggerian view appeals to an ontological event of being; the Derridean view, on the other hand, appeals to an abstract notion of event of the other. While the former seems an inappropriate guide to making revisions at the ontic level, the latter is too abstract to offer revisionary guidance. Of course Raffoul may have some particular revisions in mind, a way of adjusting our judgments of responsibility to reflect openness to the event. But if he does, he gives no account of what these revisions would entail. Indeed, there is no move from the explanans back to the explanandum; the book simply trails off.

The most regrettable aspect of the book, perhaps, is Raffoul’s disdain for related work in analytic philosophy. (He repeatedly insists that ethics has been dominated by applied ethics and disregards the ‘ethicality of ethics’, or what makes ethical decision possible, which strikes me as verifiably false.) This is especially unfortunate because recent work on responsibility has produced several strong alternatives to the authorship account. Raffoul’s continental story, properly developed, can serve as a valuable interlocutor in those debates. His book may thus provide an incipient, if flawed, impetus in this direction.