**The Source of Responsibility**\*

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Abstract: Although we are morally responsible for things of various kinds, what we bear direct responsibility for are certain exercises of our agency (and perhaps some omissions of these). Theorists disagree about what kind of agency is in this respect the source of our responsibility. Some hold that it is agency the exercises of which are actions. Others say that it is agency exercised in forming reasons-responsive attitudes on the basis of our take on reasons (or value). With attention to the relation of moral responsibility to moral obligation, I argue for the first of these views.

We are morally responsible agents, responsible because of our agency. As it might be put, our agency is the source of our responsibility. It is for exercises of agency (perhaps also omissions of these) that we can bear direct responsibility, responsibility that does not derive from our responsibility for other things. Responsibility for anything else, it appears, can only be indirect, traceable to its source in our agency.

But different kinds of agency can be, and have been, distinguished. Which kind is the source of our responsibility? That is, what kind of agency is it for exercises of which we can bear direct responsibility?[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is often assumed that it is only for actions, or actions of certain types,[[2]](#endnote-2) or certain actions and omissions of these, that we can bear direct responsibility. On such a view, agency that is the source of our responsibility is agency the exercises of which are actions—it might be called agency of the will. Much philosophical discussion of the problem of free will takes this position for granted. I call it the Action View.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Many contemporary theorists reject this view. On an alternative that several advance, there is a kind of agency that is exercised whenever we acquire attitudes such as belief, desire, or intention, or experience emotions such as fear, admiration, or anger, in response to our take on reasons, or based on our judgments about reasons (or, as some have it, value). We bear direct responsibility, it is said, for exercises of agency of this kind, including those that are not actions, as most are not. The activity here is not agency of the will, but an agency of reason that is exercised in forming reasons-responsive attitudes. Call the view that restricts direct responsibility to exercises of agency of this kind (and perhaps also omissions of these) the Attitude View.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In the first section of this paper, I review some familiar objections to the Attitude View, claims meant to favor its rival. As I see it, proponents of the Attitude View have satisfactory initial responses on these points. Following a closer look at that view, I turn to a new and, it seems to me, more fruitful line of inquiry, one focused on the relation of moral responsibility to moral obligation. As I observe, on the Attitude View, although we have obligations to perform or omit actions of various types, for the most part, at least, our responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill these obligations has to be indirect, deriving from our responsibility for other things.[[5]](#endnote-5) The denial of even coequal status to intentional action as a source of responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill these obligations, I contend, stands in need of explanation. Further, I identify several respects in which agency exercised in forming attitudes is comparatively unresponsive to considerations related to moral obligation—less responsive to such considerations than is agency of the will. For the most part, at least, attitudes cannot be formed with the aim of fulfilling obligations, motivated by recognition of our obligations, or formed in response to demands that we form them, when and because we recognize the demands as obligating us to do so. In contrast, actions can be performed with this aim, so motivated, and performed in response to demands that we perform them, because we recognize the demands as so obligating us. This greater responsiveness to considerations related to moral obligation, I maintain, favors agency of the will as the source of responsibility.

My main concern in this paper is what philosophers who distinguish varieties of moral responsibility call *accountability*.[[6]](#endnote-6) Bearing responsibility of this kind for wrongdoing can make it appropriate that one be *held to account* for what one has done. Responses that are made fitting can include (though they are not limited to) reactive attitudes such as resentment, indignation, and guilt. One might aptly be subjected to reproach or condemnation; and being thus blameworthy can at least partly justify adverse treatment of various kinds, including penalty and punishment.[[7]](#endnote-7) Toward the end of the paper, I consider a pluralist view on which accountability is but one of several kinds of moral responsibility. If there are different kinds of moral responsibility, I suggest, they might have their sources in different kinds of agency. It is for accountability that, I argue, agency of the will is favored as the source.

1. CONTROL, FREEDOM, AND VOLUNTARINESS

Proponents of the Action View sometimes claim, purportedly in favor of their view and against its competitor, that we can bear responsibility only for that over which we have some kind of control.[[8]](#endnote-8) Direct responsibility, it may be said, requires direct control, and we are said to have this only over our actions (and perhaps omissions of these).

But a requirement of control can be (and commonly is) accepted by proponents of the Attitude View, and without further elaboration it does not tell against their position. As I noted above, proponents often maintain that we exercise a kind of agency—that we are active in some manner—with respect to our reasons-responsive attitudes. Where there is agency of some kind, there is some kind of control.

For example, Angela Smith asserts that “the dividing line between activity and passivity goes through judgment: I am active, and responsible, for anything that falls within the scope of evaluative judgment (i.e., anything that is, or should be, sensitive to my evaluative judgments and commitments).”[[9]](#endnote-9) As she observes, it is not only choices, but also “desires, emotions, and other attitudes” that fall within this scope.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Pamela Hieronymi calls “evaluative control” that which one exercises in, for example, coming to believe that *p* by settling for oneself affirmatively the question of whether *p*. In such a case, one’s attitude of belief embodies one’s answer to the question. She extends the view to intentions as well as to emotions such as resentment, which likewise, she maintains, embody our answers to certain questions. “We might say that we control these aspects of our minds,” Hieronymi suggests, “because, as we change our mind, our mind changes—as we form or revise our take on things, we form or revise our attitudes.”[[11]](#endnote-11) An exercise of evaluative control, she maintains, is an exercise of a kind of agency.[[12]](#endnote-12)

It is not only in the language of agency that the claim of control can be made. Douglas Portmore declares that “we exercise direct control over our reasons-responsive attitudes by being both receptive and reactive to reasons—forming, revising, sustaining, and/or abandoning these attitudes in light of our awareness of facts (or what we take to be facts) that count for or against them.”[[13]](#endnote-13) And T. M. Scanlon (whose work has influenced the writers previously mentioned) maintains that attitudes including “beliefs, intentions, hopes, fears,…admiration, respect, contempt, and indignation” are “up to us,” in that “they depend on our judgment as to whether appropriate reasons are present.”[[14]](#endnote-14) With respect to such an attitude, he says, “it is up to us to judge whether appropriate reasons for that attitude are or are not present.”[[15]](#endnote-15) What is up to us is what we have a kind of control over.[[16]](#endnote-16)

A proponent of the Action View might resist these claims, but they seem to me in an important respect correct. There is a significant distinction to be drawn between, on the one hand, things like a feeling of hunger or a sensation of pain and, on the other hand, things like a belief about the age of the universe or contempt for a habitual liar. We are passive with respect to things of the first kind in a way in which we are not with respect to things of the second kind. Hunger pangs and pain sensations are not based on our take on, or our judgments about, reasons or value,[[17]](#endnote-17) whereas we commonly form, sustain, strengthen, attenuate, or abandon reasons-responsive attitudes on such bases.

Of course, we can purposively influence things of either kind—hunger or belief, for example—by acting, in response to reasons, with the aim of exerting such influence. (By skipping a snack, you can ensure that you will remain hungry.) But only things of the second kind are directly responsive to reasons, typically formed *for*—on the basis of—reasons. Forming reasons-responsive attitudes is itself mental activity, characteristically an exercise of reason.

This much may be granted. But it might be objected that the kind of agency that can be exercised in belief or desire, fear or admiration, is not agency that can be a source of responsibility, for it is not agency with respect to which we can be *free*. We might be active in forming and holding such attitudes, but we are not free in doing so.

This objection, too, may be countered. Philip Pettit and Michael Smith offer an account of freedom that we can—and generally do—have with respect to belief and desire. “To hold a belief or desire freely,” they say, “is to hold it in the presence of an ability, should the belief or desire be wrong, to get it right.”[[18]](#endnote-18) For anything wrongly believed, they propose, one has the ability to believe otherwise just in case, first, one would believe otherwise were it impressed upon one that one believes wrongly, and, second, the possibility of this being impressed upon one is suitably accessible. A parallel account of freedom of desire is offered. Bracketing this particular analysis of the abilities in question, there is something to be said for attributing to an agent who has abilities to get things right in belief and desire a kind of freedom with respect to what she believes and desires: she is free to track the true and the good. And with respect to many of our beliefs and desires, it seems, we do indeed have these abilities.[[19]](#endnote-19)

However active or free one might be in forming a belief, belief formation is not voluntary.[[20]](#endnote-20) The same may be said of acquiring a desire or experiencing an emotion such as fear or anger. In contrast, action is commonly voluntary. It might be said that we can bear direct responsibility only for what is voluntary. If correct, the claim would undermine the Attitude View.

Whether the claim fits well with the Action View depends on what counts as voluntary. It is often said that what is voluntary is what is done on the basis of choice, intention, or desire to do it.[[21]](#endnote-21) On this construal, decision (or choice) itself will (at least generally) not count as voluntary,[[22]](#endnote-22) for (at least generally) we do not decide to *A* (where *A*-ing is an act-type) on the basis of choice, intention, or desire to decide to *A*. Yet decision is a paradigm of that for which we can bear direct responsibility. Proponents of the Action View will not want to exclude it from this role.

The point might be accommodated by amending (as some do) the definition of the voluntary to include decision (or choice) itself as well as what is done from choice to do it. But unless more is said, the addition will be ad hoc.[[23]](#endnote-23) There is, in any case, the evident need to explain why voluntariness is required for a source of responsibility. Without that explanation, an objection from voluntariness against the Attitude View simply begs the question. (A similar burden would fall on the objection that the freedom that we must have with respect to agency that is the source of responsibility is, specifically, freedom of the *will*.)

If agency exercised generally in forming reasons-responsive attitudes cannot be a source of responsibility, while agency whose exercises are actions can be, why is this so? What is the difference between actions and these other exercises of reason in virtue of which this is so?

1. RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTIONS

To address the question, I shall take a different tack, attending to the relation of moral responsibility to moral obligation. However, before proceeding further we should take a closer look at the Attitude View. According to that view, agency that is the source of responsibility is agency exercised with respect to reasons-responsive attitudes such as belief, desire, intention, and emotions of various kinds. But the view is open to several interpretations regarding precisely what it is for which we can bear direct responsibility, and proponents do not appear to be in agreement with one another on the matter.

On one alternative, the view might be that reasons-responsive *attitudes* themselves—instances of belief, desire, intention, and emotion—are the things for which we can bear direct responsibility. For having such an attitude, it might be said, is exercising the agency that is the source of responsibility.[[24]](#endnote-24) Somewhat differently, it could be held that what one can bear direct responsibility for is *forming*, *sustaining*, *strengthening*, *attenuating*,or *abandoning* such an attitude, in response to one’s take on reasons. For it might be said that forming, sustaining, etc. are exercises of the agency in which responsibility has its source.[[25]](#endnote-25) Yet again, since it is characteristically via *our take on reasons* *(or value)* that we exercise direct control, when we do, over our reasons-responsive attitudes, it might be held that it is only for “our take on what is true or important or worth doing,”[[26]](#endnote-26) or our judgments about reasons or value, that we can bear direct responsibility.[[27]](#endnote-27) Such judgments can be partly constitutive of attitudes—judging someone excellent can partly constitute one’s admiration of her—but since, for example, one can judge a certain action worth doing without yet intending to do it, the judgments are in an important respect prior to the attitudes themselves.

Each of these alternatives leaves out all or most actions as things for which we can bear direct responsibility. The second alternative might allow direct responsibility for what we may call *attitude-actions*, actions that consist in intentionally forming attitudes of one kind or another. Assuming or supposing that *p*, or accepting it for the sake of argument, are actions of taking it to be the case that *p* for some deliberative or conversational purpose. These are things that we can do intentionally; they are exercises of agency of the will. Imagining some object or some scenario—for example, that you are standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon—is similarly an exercise of such agency. And, as many see it, deciding to act, understood as the act of forming an intention, is an intentional action; when one decides to *A*, one intentionally forms an intention to *A*.[[28]](#endnote-28) Since in assuming, supposing, imagining, and deciding to act we commonly respond to reasons, these actions might be counted, on the second alternative, among the exercises of agency for which we can bear direct responsibility. But even on this second alternative, most exercises of the kind of agency that is said to be the source of responsibility will not be actions, since acquiring (or revising, abandoning, etc.) a belief, a desire, or an emotion of one kind or another is not an action. And most actions will not be exercises of the kind of agency that is said to be the source of responsibility, since most actions are not attitude-actions.

On the first and third alternatives, any responsibility that we bear for any action will be indirect. On the second alternative, responsibility for any action other than an attitude-action—responsibility for things such as lending a hand or telling a lie—will derive from responsibility for something else, namely, one or more exercises of agency (or omissions of these) with respect to reasons-responsive attitudes. Either implication is worthy of note, even if it should be obvious that the Attitude View implies such a thing.

Consider, in this regard, the view advanced by Hieronymi. She maintains that the “fundamental activity” that “grounds and explains our responsibility” is that of settling for oneself a question.[[29]](#endnote-29) When (for some proposition that *p*) one deliberates about whether *p* and, on the basis of that deliberation, forms the belief that *p*, one therein settles for oneself (affirmatively) the question of whether *p*. One’s belief embodies one’s answer to that question. Similarly, when (for some act-type *A*-ing) one deliberates about whether to *A* and, on the basis of that deliberation, decides to *A*, one therein settles for oneself the question of whether to *A*; one’s intention to *A* embodies one’s answer to that question.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Carrying out a decision to *A* is doing something further than making the decision. And it is neither settling for oneself again the question of whether to *A* (there is no need to repeat the task) nor, usually, settling for oneself any further question.[[31]](#endnote-31) An intentional action is an execution of an intention. Settling affirmatively the question of whether to *A* does not suffice even for *beginning* to execute the intention therein formed. (One can fail even to attempt to do something that one intends to do.[[32]](#endnote-32)) For the most part (at least), agency exercised in performing an action is not what Hieronymi takes to be the fundamental activity for which we are responsible.

Indeed, as Hieronymi sees matters, it is characteristic of action that we enjoy “discretion” with respect to it: “you can (intend to act and providing all goes well) act for any reason that you take to count sufficiently in favor of so acting.”[[33]](#endnote-33) But “we cannot enjoy discretion with respect to those things for which we are most fundamentally responsible.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Our fundamental responsibility is for “our take on what is true or important or worth doing,”[[35]](#endnote-35) a take that is embodied in our attitudes. And “we cannot enjoy discretion over takings or findings true or important.”[[36]](#endnote-36) An incentive for believing that *p*, one that you do not take to bear on the question of whether *p*, cannot be a reason *for which* you so believe.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Hence most (if not all) actions fall outside the scope of that for which we can be fundamentally responsible. Although they are reasons-responsive and we generally perform them for reasons, they are not exercises of the kind of agency that “grounds and explains our responsibility.” Such agency is, apparently, to be understood more narrowly, its exercises consisting in taking this or that to be true, important, or worth doing. On the assumption that that for which we can be fundamentally responsible is that for which we can bear direct responsibility, the view rules out direct responsibility for most (if not all) action. This is a remarkable feature of the view.

Executing an intention is not a passive upshot of coming to intend. It is an exercise of agency in its own right. It is not something that will occur automatically, provided one’s muscles are in good order and the environment cooperates; one must act! Having come to intend to *A*, one must do something further if one is to *A*—namely, *A*! And characteristically, having come so to intend, it remains up to oneself whether one *A*-s. If one does, then, unlike in acquiring a desire to *A*, or a belief that one will *A*, one does something intentionally; and standardly, in executing an intention, one does something for a reason. It is, I think, in need of explanation why such intentional doings of things for reasons should be regarded as exercises of only a second-class agency, one incapable of serving as a source of responsibility.

Our discretion with respect to agency of the will, as characterized by Hieronymi, is its responsiveness to a wider range of reasons. This greater reasons-responsiveness hardly seems to disqualify agency of the will from serving as a source of responsibility. On the contrary, it would seem to recommend such agency for this role. For, as we shall see, it is in part a greater responsiveness to considerations related to our moral obligations.

1. MORAL OBLIGATION

Our agency is subject to moral obligation: we can be morally required to do, or not to do, one thing or another, such that a failure to do as required is morally wrong. And agency that is subject to moral obligation is agency for which we can be morally responsible.[[38]](#endnote-38) We can be praiseworthy or blameworthy for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our moral obligations. Further, such responsibility need not always be derivative; we can bear direct responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our moral obligations. Thus, the kind of agency for exercises of which we can bear direct responsibility is itself agency subject to moral obligation. How might this fact figure in evaluating the relative merits of the Action View and the Attitude View?

Note, first, a distinction in the contents of obligations. Let us say that a moral obligation to perform, or not to perform, an action of one kind or another is an *action-focused* obligation. In contrast, an obligation to have, or not to have, an attitude of a certain kind, when acquisition of such an attitude cannot itself be an action—when it cannot be an exercise of agency of the will—is an *attitude-focused* obligation. (As I explained in the preceding section, formation of *some* attitudes *can* be action.)

To clarify: we can (and do) perform actions of *bringing it about* that we acquire certain beliefs. For example, one can flip a light switch, thereby bringing it about—even deliberately so—that one acquires a belief that the light is on.[[39]](#endnote-39) Perhaps, as Pascal suggested, a non-believer can make herself believe in God by “taking holy water, having masses said, etc.”[[40]](#endnote-40) But the eventual acquisition of belief in such a case is not itself an exercise of agency of the will; it is something brought about by such action. While a moral obligation to hold a certain belief might generate an action-focused obligation to act so as to bring it about that one acquires that belief, an obligation to believe will itself count as attitude-focused. The same goes for any obligations that we might have to desire, fear, admire, and so forth.

It is a disputed matter whether we are subject to attitude-focused obligations.[[41]](#endnote-41) As might be expected, some proponents of the Attitude View affirm them. Angela Smith suggests that a contractualist framework supports “a principle requiring that we hold certain basic attitudes of respect and goodwill toward others.”[[42]](#endnote-42) The requirement, Smith maintains, is a moral obligation, a duty owed to others; to violate it is to wrong another. And given that it is not by an exercise of agency of the will that one can form or hold the required respect and goodwill, what is affirmed is an attitude-focused moral obligation.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Some recent work in epistemology—much of it on moral encroachment—affirms attitude-focused obligations to hold, or not to hold, certain beliefs. It is said that one can wrong another—for example, a spouse who has been struggling with his drinking problem—by coming to believe certain false things about him—for example, that he has fallen off the wagon, when in fact he smells of wine only because someone spilled it on his jacket.[[44]](#endnote-44) Beliefs can be diminishing, representing a person’s agency as worse or less than it in fact is. And, it is said, we have claims on one another not to be diminished in this way. One wrongs another when one holds such a diminishing belief about that person.[[45]](#endnote-45) The wrong, I take it, would be a violation of a moral obligation not to hold such a belief. Some theorists maintain that we can have, as well, moral obligations *to* believe others, and thus to believe what they say.[[46]](#endnote-46)

But of course, even if we have *attitude*-focused obligations, we also have *action*-focused obligations, obligations to perform, or not to perform, actions of certain kinds. One might be morally required not to tell a lie, or required to lend a helping hand to a friend in need. What is morally required here is not—or not just—that one have or not have certain desires or intentions; what is required is action or its omission. And we can, of course, be responsible for fulfilling or failing to fulfill such obligations.

Yet, as should now be obvious, the Attitude View rules out direct responsibility for such actions, and thus rules out direct responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill such action-focused obligations. For it locates the source of responsibility in agency exercised in forming, sustaining, revising, or abandoning reasons-responsive attitudes, and the actions in question do not consist in any such thing.

This is a striking implication of the view, one that I find puzzling. Why should we not be able to bear direct responsibility for intentionally doing things that we are morally obligated to do? There is, it seems to me, an explanatory burden that falls on the Attitude View here, one that, as far as I am aware, has not been discharged.

1. AIM, MOTIVATION, AND DEMAND

I turn now to some limitations on the agency exercised in forming attitudes. If, indeed, we have attitude-focused moral obligations, agency of this kind is comparatively unresponsive to considerations related to our obligations—less responsive to such considerations than is agency of the will. This lesser responsiveness to considerations related to moral obligation casts doubt on the idea that responsibility—including responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our moral obligations—has its source in, and solely in, our agency with respect to attitudes. Whereas the two preceding sections place an explanatory burden on the Attitude View, the points raised here seem to me to count against that view. The Attitude View, I think, stands in need of defense on these points.

To begin, standardly when one is obligated to perform an action of a certain kind, it is possible to do the required thing *with the aim* of fulfilling the obligation. One can do it *for that purpose*. You might help a friend or tell the truth with the aim (even if not the sole aim) of doing as you are morally required.

In contrast, one cannot believe that *p* (or desire to *A*, or feel angry) for the purpose of doing as one is morally required to do. Indeed, it does not seem that the formation of such attitudes can be purposive at all. Granted, one can endeavor, for example, to settle the question of whether *p*. But what is then carried out purposively, with the aim of settling the question, is one’s inquiry, which is agency of the will. Settling in the end on a specific answer, say, the affirmative answer that *p*, is not itself purposive activity, and hence not something that can be done with the aim of fulfilling a moral obligation.

We can, of course, purposively manage our attitudes. And if we have attitude-focused obligations, we can conduct this management for the purpose of fulfilling these obligations. If I am obligated to come to believe that the light is on, I can flip the light switch, and do so with the aim of fulfilling my obligation. But it is the action that is performed with that aim. Similarly, if I am obligated to believe someone, I can refrain from seeking information that might cast doubt on her claims, and do so with the aim of fulfilling my obligation. It is my omission that is then purposive.

If we have attitude-focused obligations, then, oddly, the Attitude View implies that (at least generally) it is for what we *cannot* do with the aim of fulfilling them that we can bear direct responsibility, and for what we *can* do with this aim we can bear only indirect responsibility. The implication seems to me to have things backwards, or at least wrongly to deny the possibility of direct responsibility for exercises of agency that *can* be exercised with the aim of fulfilling our obligations. The fact that one can, in exercising a kind of agency, respond in this way to one’s recognition of a moral obligation seems to speak *in favor of*, rather than against, that agency’s role as a source of responsibility. The Attitude View seems wrongly to privilege agency that cannot be exercised with the aim of fulfilling a moral obligation as a source of responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our moral obligations.

A second, related point concerns motivation. Standardly, when one has a moral obligation to do a certain thing, one can be motivated by one’s recognition of this fact to do what is required, and one can do it because one is obligated to do it. You might tell the truth on some occasion because, as you recognize, you are morally required to tell the truth then. In contrast, if we have attitude-focused obligations to hold certain attitudes, although recognition of these obligations can motivate actions aimed at bringing it about that we acquire the attitudes in question, it cannot directly motivate that acquisition. One cannot be directly moved to believe that *p* by one’s recognition that one is morally obligated so to believe; the fact that one has the obligation cannot be one’s basis for the belief. Similarly, although you can be moved to anger at someone by your recognition that she has lied to you, the fact that you are morally obligated to be angry at her (if you can have such an obligation) cannot be the basis of your anger.[[47]](#endnote-47)

A proponent of the Attitude View who affirms attitude-focused moral obligations, then, and who holds that we can bear direct responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill them, must hold that this is so despite the fact that it is not possible to be motivated to do what we are therein obligated to do by our recognition that we have these moral obligations, and despite the fact that we cannot hold the required attitudes on the bases of these obligations. Indeed, with the possible exception of attitude-actions, this theorist must hold that always when we bear responsibility for an exercise of agency that *can* be motivated by such recognition, our responsibility must be indirect, deriving from responsibility for something that *cannot* be motivated by such recognition. Again, the implication strikes me as backward, thus calling into question the view that gives rise to it. Why should agency that characteristically *cannot* be motivated by recognition that it is morally required be privileged as the source of our responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our morally obligations?

Granted, it is a disputed question whether the fact that one is morally obligated to do a certain thing is a *normative* reason to do that thing.[[48]](#endnote-48) I am inclined to think that it can be; but I do not rely on this position here. For the point is one about *motivational potential*. The thought that one has a certain obligation is not typically motivationally inert; commonly one can be moved by it to do the thing in question.

Similarly, it is a matter of dispute whether it is *praiseworthy* to do what is morally required because it is morally required.[[49]](#endnote-49) Again, I am inclined to think that it can be, but, again, the argument here does not rely on this position. Rather, it relies on something that all parties to the debate about moral worth accept: it is possible to be motivated to do a certain thing by one’s recognition that one is morally required to do it.

There is a third aspect of the comparative lack of responsiveness of the agency exercised in forming attitudes. In this case, the lack of responsiveness is to a type of consideration *in virtue of which* one has a moral obligation. Such a consideration is an *obligation-making* reason. We should expect that agency for exercises of which we can bear direct responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our moral obligations can be responsive to reasons of this kind, and responsive to them because we recognize them as obligation-making.

To see this point, note that some of our moral obligations are directed: one is obligated *to* some particular person to do (or not to do) a certain thing. When this is so, one owes it to that person to do (or not to do) that thing, and in failing to fulfill the obligation one would wrong that person. In such a case, the person to whom the obligation is owed has authority to demand that one do (or not do) the thing in question.

Indeed, we sometimes create directed obligations by issuing demands, when we have authority to do so. If I lend you something of mine on the condition that you return it on demand, my subsequent demand for the return of my property generates your obligation to return it. The demand transforms a conditional obligation into an actual one. That I demand the return is then a normative reason for you to return my property, a consideration in virtue of which you are obligated to effect the return. It is an obligation-making reason.

When what is demanded is an exercise of agency of the will, such an obligation-making reason can be an agent’s *operative* reason for doing what is required, a reason for which, on the basis of which, she does that thing.[[50]](#endnote-50) That I demand the return of my property is not only a normative reason for you to effect the return; it can be your operative reason, thus explaining why you do so. You can return what is mine because I demand that you do so, and, moreover, because you recognize the demand as obligating you to do so.

In contrast, normally, that you demand that I believe that *p* cannot be my operative reason for so believing. That you so demand normally will have no bearing on whether *p*, and I will not take to have any such bearing. And I cannot base my belief that *p* on a consideration that I do not take to bear on whether *p*.[[51]](#endnote-51) In that case, the fact that you make the demand, even if I take your demand to obligate me to believe that *p*, cannot be the basis on which I hold that belief. At best, it can be my operative reason for exercising agency of the will with the aim of managing my attitudes so that I come to have the demanded belief. Similarly, one’s basis for desiring something will be a consideration that one takes to show that thing in some respect desirable; but normally one will not take a demand that one desire that thing to have any such bearing, even if one takes it to obligate one to have the desire.

We might contrive a case in which one can believe as demanded, because one is so demanded; but still, as far as I can see, it will not be a case in which one would do so because one takes the demand to obligate one to hold the belief. For example, suppose that you demand of me, “Believe that I demand something of you.” In this case, that you so demand is sufficient evidence for the demanded belief, and as such it can serve as my basis for the belief. However, in basing my belief on it, I would be responding to it *as evidence*, not as a consideration bearing on what I am morally required to do. It is in the latter way that I can respond to a demand when what is demanded is an exercise of agency of the will. And it is telling that cases in which this is so can be quite ordinary.

Demands that generate moral obligations can move us to act as demanded, when and because we recognize them as obligating us, whereas such demands cannot so move us to believe, desire, or feel as demanded. Agency of the will is responsive in this way to the obligation-making reasons we are given with such demands. Attitude-actions aside, the agency by which we form attitudes is not.

It might be objected that while a demand can generate an action-focused obligation, it cannot generate an attitude-focused obligation. A demand that one believe that *p*, if it gives one a reason to form that belief, normally gives one a *wrong kind of reason* for belief, one that is, in the first instance, a reason to act with the aim of bringing it about that one comes to have the belief. An obligation generated by such a demand, then, will be in the first instance an action-focused obligation, not an attitude-focused obligation.

The objection casts some doubt on the very idea that we can have attitude-focused obligations. For if demands can generate obligations, why can they not generate these? But without rejecting the possibility of attitude-focused obligations, there is still, I think, reason here to think that it is agency of the will that is the source of our responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill any that we might have. For it is only agency of the will that is responsive, in the indicated way, to demands that can generate obligations.

In sum, agency of the will can be exercised with the aim of fulfilling our moral obligations; our exercises of it can be motivated by recognition of our moral obligations; and we can exercise it in response to demands that we do so, because we recognize these demands as obligating us so to act. In contrast, (attitude-actions aside) the agency exercised in forming attitudes is not responsive in these ways to considerations of these kinds related to our moral obligations. This greater responsiveness of agency of the will to considerations related in these ways to moral obligation speaks in favor of it as the source of responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our moral obligations.

A proponent of the Attitude View might deny the relevance of these points. It might be granted that agency of the will is responsive as indicated, while that exercised with respect to attitudes at least generally is not; however, it might be said, this difference has no bearing on which kind of agency can serve as the source of responsibility.

It would count heavily against a proposed candidate for the source of responsibility—when this is understood as accountability—were that candidate *entirely* unresponsive to considerations related to moral obligation. We can be accountable for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our obligations, and appropriately held to account when we fail to fulfill them. We should, then, expect a close relationship between, on the one hand, that for which we can bear such responsibility and, on the other, agency that is responsive to considerations related to our moral obligations. The lesser responsiveness of agency exercised in forming attitudes thus raises a serious question about the suitability of the candidate proposed by the Attitude View. The points made here cannot be so easily sloughed off.

If we have attitude-focused moral obligations, the Action View implies that we cannot bear direct accountability for fulfilling or failing to fulfill them. A proponent of that view can, of course, acknowledge indirect accountability here, accountability deriving from our accountability for actions (or omissions of actions) that have contributed to our having (or lacking) the attitudes in question. In fact, the management of our attitudes via agency of the will is a common phenomenon, and facility with it is an ordinary adult achievement. Notably, exercising such managerial agency is something that can be done purposively, with the aim of fulfilling one’s moral obligations, on the basis of one’s recognition of one’s moral obligations, and in response to demands that one recognizes as obligating one to do so (and because one so recognizes the demands).

There is something more that a proponent of the Action View might want to say about our responsibility for attitudes; I come to it in Section VII.

1. AN ATTITUDE-PLUS VIEW

Although Scanlon holds that we bear direct responsibility for judgments reflected in our attitudes, he denies that we have attitude-focused (or judgment-focused) moral obligations. In the course of arguing that moral permissibility does not depend on one’s reasons for doing what one does, he observes:

The question of permissibility is the question, “May I do X?” which is typically asked from the point of view of an agent who is presented with a number of different ways of acting. The question is, which of these may one choose? The question of permissibility thus applies only to alternatives between which a competent agent can choose.[[52]](#endnote-52)

He then argues that what to take to be reasons is not something about which we can choose:

We are certainly responsible for what we take to be reasons. That is to say, we are open to criticism, including but not limited to moral criticism, for taking things to be reasons that are not and for failing to respond to things that are. But we do not, it seems to me, *choose* which things to take as ultimate reasons. We have to decide whether something is a reason or not—this is part of our being responsible. But deciding in such a case is not choosing, because it lacks the relevant element of free play.[[53]](#endnote-53)

By ‘deciding’ here, Scanlon means *judging* (later in the same paragraph he uses ‘judgment’ and ‘decision’ interchangeably). Agency exercised in judging which things are reasons, then, is the source of moral responsibility, but neither these judgments nor the attitudes that reflect them are subject to moral obligation; neither is the kind of thing that can be impermissible.[[54]](#endnote-54) Moral obligation, as Scanlon sees it, is action-focused: it applies only to things among which we can choose, that is, actions and omissions of actions.

If judgment is not subject to moral obligation, and it is only for judgment that we can bear direct responsibility, then there will be no direct responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our moral obligations. The implication is, I think, one that is better avoided.

To allow for direct responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill obligations, given Scanlon’s position on the objects of obligation, one might opt for a view on which the agency that is said to be the source of responsibility is a kind that includes agency exercised in, say, forming a belief or becoming angry, as well as agency exercised in action. It is, we might say, the broader exercise of reason. We do something for a reason commonly when we acquire a belief, desire, or intention, and when we come to experience emotions of various kinds; and likewise, we do something for a reason commonly when we act. In cases of both kinds we respond, in an exercise of agency, to reasons that we recognize—or at least to what we take to be reasons. The cases are distinct sub-kinds, but, it might be said, it is for any exercise of the broader kind that one can bear direct responsibility. Call this position the Attitude-Plus View. On this view, agency of the will serves as a source of responsibility, but it is denied exclusive claim to that role, for direct responsibility is recognized also for exercises of the agency of reason that are not actions.

The Attitude-Plus View, I think, escapes the charge that it offers an objectionably disjunctive source of responsibility. For there is something common to the two sub-kinds of agency that it identifies: exercises of both are (at least typically) responses to reasons. Still, to accept that it is only agency of the will that can serve as a source of responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill moral obligations is to accept that a distinctive kind of agency is required here. And if only this distinctive kind of agency can serve as a source of responsibility for fulfilling or failing to fulfill moral obligations, this fact gives us some reason to think that we encounter here a distinctive kind of moral responsibility.

There is further reason to think that this is so. Responses that are made appropriate when an agent has objectionable attitudes can be serious; they can include various forms of thinking poorly of the agent, negative emotion, and withdrawal from interpersonal engagement. Responses that can be justified when an agent has violated an action-focused moral obligation include these, as well as some that are, in a plain manner of speaking, far more serious: penalties, punishment, the deliberate imposition of burdens in return for the offense. The point is acknowledged by Robert Adams. Despite maintaining that we can bear direct responsibility for attitudes, he observes:

I do not believe that exactly the same responses are appropriate to involuntary as to voluntary sins. In particular, only voluntary acts and omissions are rightly punished by the state, or even by a university or a club. A wicked motivation, or a lack of sincere remorse, may perhaps be allowed to aggravate the punishment for a misdeed; but it is not right to punish someone solely for an emotion or attitude or belief that has not issued in some forbidden voluntary conduct.[[55]](#endnote-55)

If indeed responses that can be justified in the two cases differ in this way, this fact is reason to think that we are dealing with different kinds of responsibility, having their sources in different kinds of agency. The difference in the normative significance of bearing responsibility suggests a difference in the kind of responsibility borne.[[56]](#endnote-56)

It might be objected that harsher responses can be justified in cases of action not because we have a different kind of responsibility, with its source in a different kind of agency, but simply because the consequences of actions can be far worse than the consequences of attitudes. Bad thoughts might wrong us, and knowing of them can hurt, but unlike the throwing of sticks and stones, they do not break our bones. But I do not think that this observation fully accounts for the difference in justified responses. Imagine a population of rational beings whose bad beliefs, desires, and emotions *can* and sometimes *do* directly cause grave harm to their objects. These creatures would, I think, have moral obligations that we do not have to see to it that they do not have such attitudes. These managerial obligations would be action-focused, obligations to act, or omit action, so as to ensure that they do not have the harmful attitudes. What would (at least partly) justify unwanted or even harsh treatment when they have harmed others by their bad thoughts would, it seems to me, be their failure to fulfill such action-focused obligations to manage their thoughts. It would be their failure to exercise agency of the will as required.

I indicated at the start that my main focus is what is often called accountability. When one is accountable for something that one has done, it can be appropriate that one be held to account for it. Responsibility that we bear for fulfilling or failing to fulfill action-focused moral obligations is accountability. One can appropriately be held to account for perjuring oneself or assaulting someone. Responses that can be justified include not just criticism and rebuke but also penalty and punishment. If responsibility that has its source in the kind of agency exercised in, for example, forming a belief can justify only a lesser range of responses, this fact provides reason to think that such responsibility is something other than accountability.

1. ANSWERABILITY

When one has a reasons-responsive attitude, a particular kind of “why” question is in place. It makes sense to ask, “Why do you believe this?”, “Why do you want that?”, “Why are you angry at him?”, and so forth. A question of this kind seeks not just a cause of one’s having the attitude; it seeks a reason, one that is both explanatory and, in one’s own eyes at least, normative—a consideration that one sees as justifying the attitude and on the basis of which one has it. The question is given application, it is said, even when the answer is, “For no reason.” Its presupposition is that the attitude is one that *can* be acquired and possessed for a reason, and this presupposition may be correct even if one has the attitude for no reason.[[57]](#endnote-57)

When such a “why” question has application, it is said, we are *answerable* for our attitudes; there is an answer to the question that does not reject its presupposition. It can be appropriate to ask for one’s justification for holding (or lacking) the attitude, and various assessments and responses can be appropriate depending on the answer. One might be criticizable as irrational, uncharitable, or malicious. Answerability of this kind, several writers hold, is responsibility, or responsibility in its most basic form.[[58]](#endnote-58)

However, it is far from evident that one may properly be held to account for all for which one is answerable, in the given sense. One may properly be asked to provide an account of why one holds this or that attitude. But being held to account can encompass considerably more than this. It can include being responded to with resentment or indignation, being chastised or rebuked, being penalized or punished.

If one can be answerable for one’s attitudes without its being appropriate to subject one to these further kinds of responses for having them, that is reason to think that answerability is not accountability. Insofar as accountability is our focus, then, our answerability for reasons-responsive attitudes does not suffice to establish them as a source of such responsibility.[[59]](#endnote-59)

1. PLURALISM AND THE ACTION VIEW

Proponents of positions like the Action View sometimes contend that we can judge an agent bad, even reprehensible, for having bad attitudes, without blaming the agent for having them.[[60]](#endnote-60) The evaluative assessment is thus distinguished from an attribution of responsibility.

Not everyone accepts the distinction. Adams reports: “To me it seems strange to say that I do not blame someone though I think poorly of him, believing that his motives are thoroughly selfish. Intuitively I should have said that thinking poorly of a person in this way *is* a form of unspoken blame.”[[61]](#endnote-61)

Of course, an Action View theorist can accept that we can bear *indirect* responsibility for attitudes such as selfish motives. As I observed toward the end of Section IV, sometimes earlier actions or omissions of ours have contributed to our later having certain attitudes, and when that is so, responsibility for having the attitudes can sometimes be traced to responsibility for those prior actions or omissions.

But it is questionable whether this phenomenon is sufficiently comprehensive. Tracing of responsibility in this way is generally thought to require that at the time of the earlier, source action (or omission), the agent foresaw, or could reasonably have been expected to foresee, that the result in question would, or would likely, ensue. And it is not clear that such an epistemic requirement is always met when someone is to blame for having an objectionable belief, desire, or emotion.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Action View proponents might do better to recognize more than one variety of moral responsibility, each with its source in some kind of agency, with agency of different kinds serving as sources of different kinds of responsibility. If it is held that accountability has its source in agency of the will, it might nevertheless be accepted that agency exercised in forming reasons-responsive attitudes can serve as a source of responsibility of a different kind.[[63]](#endnote-63) Given such a view, we will commonly bear direct responsibility of a kind for attitudes (or for our take on reasons or value reflected in attitudes), though this kind of responsibility will not be accountability.

1. CONDITION AND SOURCE

Agency of the will can be the source of our accountability only if it is reasons-responsive. And, of course, it generally is: usually when we act, we do what we do for a reason. But we act for reasons only given that we exercise reason in acquiring attitudes, such as beliefs, desires, and intentions, on which we act. Thus, agency of the will can be reasons-responsive only given that agency exercised more broadly than in action is reasons-responsive.

This makes the reasons-responsiveness of attitudes a *necessary condition* of our accountability. It does not make agency exercised in forming reasons-responsive attitudes the *source* of accountability, in the sense introduced at the beginning of this paper. That is, it does not imply that if we are to be accountable for our actions, our accountability for them must derive from our accountability for the attitudes on which we act. It does not imply that we must bear direct accountability for our attitudes, or for forming, sustaining, or abandoning them, or for our take on reasons or value that is embodied in our attitudes. A necessary condition of our accountability need not be something for which we bear direct accountability.[[64]](#endnote-64)

Earlier I claimed that the Attitude View carries an explanatory burden: it must be explained why agency exercises of which are characteristically intentional doings of things for reasons cannot serve as a source of accountability. It might have been thought that the fact that agency of the will can be responsive to reasons only if the agency by which we form attitudes is so responsive provides at least part of the needed explanation. But we can now see that this reply conflates a condition with a source We could not be reasons-responsive in our exercises of agency of the will unless we were reasons-responsive in forming our attitudes. But this fact does not imply that what we bear direct accountability for must be exercises of agency in forming reasons-responsive attitudes.

1. CONCLUSION

We have moral obligations to perform, or not to perform, actions of various types, and we can be responsible for fulfilling or failing to fulfill these obligations. Whereas the Action View allows that we can bear direct accountability here, the Attitude View implies that for the most part, at least, we cannot. The denial is puzzling. Why can we not bear direct accountability for intentionally doing things that we are morally obligated to do? The Attitude View assumes an explanatory burden here, one that as far as I am aware has not been discharged.

Further, agency of the will can be exercised with the aim of fulfilling our moral obligations; our exercises of it can be motivated by recognition of our moral obligations; and we can exercise it in response to demands that we do so, when and because we recognize these demands as obligating us to do so. In contrast, (attitude-actions aside) the agency exercised in forming attitudes is not responsive in these ways to considerations related to our moral obligations. These observations, it seems to me, favor the Action View over its rival. For agency that provides the source of our accountability for fulfilling or failing to fulfill our moral obligations must be responsive to considerations related to these obligations.

Nevertheless, proponents of the Action View have reason to concede a point to their opponents: there is a type of responsibility, albeit not accountability, that we can bear for attitudes, and we can bear direct responsibility of this kind for attitudes (or for our take on reasons or value reflected in them). We can appropriately be asked for our reasons for believing, desiring, fearing, and so forth, and we can be criticizable in various ways when we hold these attitudes without good reason. But bearing responsibility of this kind does not leave one open to being held to account for what one has done. It does not provide the justification for certain forms of adverse treatment that accountability can provide.

Unlike objections to the Attitude View considered and set aside in Section I, the considerations raised here, even if sound, do not yield a decisive refutation of that view. They are considerations that, in my estimation, count significantly against that view, and in favor of its rival. But proponents of the Attitude View might respond that these considerations are outweighed by others that count against the Action View, and in favor of their own. However, until we have a convincing argument of this kind, it seems to me that the Action View is our better option.

**Notes**

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   My focal question can be distinguished from two others. First, it differs from the question of what *conditions* must be satisfied if one is to bear direct responsibility for something; I say more about this distinction in Section VIII. Second, it differs from the question of which, if either, of (i) *one’s being responsible* or (ii) *its being fitting that one be held responsible* is prior to, and explains, the other. Either way (and even if neither is prior), when one is responsible, one bears responsibility *for* something, and we can ask for which things one can bear *direct* responsibility. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Decisions or choices are sometimes singled out here. On a more liberal view, it is for basic actions that we can bear direct responsibility. On the notion of basic action, see, e.g., Berent Enç, *How We Act: Causes, Reasons, and Intentions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Action View differs from what is sometimes called Volitionism. Neil Levy characterizes the latter as the view that “an agent is responsible for something…just in case that agent has—directly or indirectly—*chosen* that thing”; see Levy, “The Good, the Bad and the Blameworthy,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2005): 2-16, 2. The Action View does not give this role to choice. I say more about this point in Section I. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Proponents include T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 6, and *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), ch. 4; Angela M. Smith, “Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life,” *Ethics* 115 (2005): 236-71; Peter A. Graham, “A Sketch of a Theory of Moral Blameworthiness,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88 (2014): 388-409; Pamela Hieronymi, “Reflection and Responsibility,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42 (2014): 3-41; and Douglas W. Portmore, *Opting for the Best: Oughts and Options* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), chs. 2 & 3.A similar view is advanced by Robert Merrihew Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 3-31, who judges it “closer to the truth” (15) that responsibility for actions depends on responsibility for attitudes than that the reverse is so.

   These theorists disagree about several details. Some (e.g., Scanlon) take the judgments in question to be judgments about *reasons*; others (e.g., Smith) take them to be evaluative judgments, judgments about *value*. Some (e.g., Hieronymi) deny any necessary role for higher-order attitudes, which is what a judgment that something or other is a reason for an attitude would be. The differences do not matter to my discussion; it is what is common to these views that concerns me here. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The qualification concerns actions that consist in intentionally forming attitudes of one kind or another; on such actions, see Section II. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See, e.g., Gary Watson, “Two Faces of Responsibility,” *Philosophical Topics* 24, no. 2 (1996): 227-48; Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), ch. 4; and David Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), ch. 3. There are differences among these theorists’ conceptions of accountability. What matters to the discussion here are the features indicated in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Proponents of the Attitude View hold views similar to this one about the normative significance of bearing responsibility for something. For references and details, see note 59 below. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The requirement of control is sometimes supported with a normative claim, to the effect that it is unfair to blame people for things over which they have lacked control. This normative claim might itself be challenged; see, e.g., Pamela Hieronymi, “The Force and Fairness of Blame” *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 115-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Smith, “Responsibility for Attitudes,” 263. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Pamela Hieronymi, “Two Kinds of Agency,” in *Mental Actions*, ed. Lucy O’Brien and Matthew Soteriou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 138-62, 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Watson makes a case for the existence of cognitive agency alongside that of the will. We exercise cognitive agency, he maintains, when we deliberate about whether something is so and come to a belief about the matter on the basis of that deliberation. Forming a belief in this way manifests one’s “adjudicative capacities.” Thus, “we can (and do) say that my beliefs are ‘up to me’: they are subject (potentially at least) to my decision-making powers, my normative competence.” See Gary Watson, “The Work of the Will,” in *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality*, ed. Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 172-200, 192.

    Watson affirms epistemic responsibility for beliefs, but he distinguishes this from moral responsibility. He writes: “Both epistemic and moral responsibility involve a kind of accountability. But there are dimensions of moral accountability for intention that have no counterpart in the epistemic case. We can put this by saying that we have notions of culpability and guilt that don’t apply to responsibility for belief…. The notions I have in mind are thought to ground various reactive attitudes, blame, and other hard treatment of the culprit” (ibid., 194). Unlike those discussed in the text here, Watson does not appear to take cognitive agency to be a source of moral accountability. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Portmore, *Opting for the Best*, 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 20 & 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 22. Complicating Scanlon’s position is his view that we can be responsible for recalcitrant attitudes, attitudes that we possess despite their conflict with our reflective judgments about what reasons we have. He remarks, “A consideration can continue to seem to me to be a reason even though I judge firmly that it is not one” (*Moral Dimensions*, 194). However, he maintains, “When something seems to me to be a reason, it is up to me to decide whether it is one. This is up to me in the sense of being a judgment that I am answerable for and can be asked to defend, but it is not, in general, up to me in the sense of being a matter of choice on my part” (ibid., 193). “Our attitudes toward reasons,” he holds, are “ideally, or normatively, under our control,” though “what would hold ideally is not always true in practice” (ibid., 194). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Scanlon takes such judgments about reasons to be the basis of what he calls “responsibility as attributability” (*What We Owe to Each Other*, 248) or, later, “moral reaction responsibility” (T. M. Scanlon, “Forms and Conditions of Responsibility,” in *The Nature of Moral Responsibility: New Essays*, ed. Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, and Angela M. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89-111, 89. As he construes this, it resembles in important respects what I take to be my focus here. The terminology, however, can be confusing. For example, in “Two Faces of Responsibility,” Watson distinguishes what he calls “attributability” from “accountability.” But unlike Watson’s attributability, Scanlon’s responsibility as attributability can render fitting reactive attitudes such as resentment, indignation, and guilt, and the kind of blame at issue with Scanlon’s attributability can be blame for violating moral obligations to others. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Nikola Grahek, in *Feeling Pain and Being in Pain*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), points out that the ordinary experience of pain includes sensory-discriminative, emotional-cognitive, and behavioral (or dispositional) components. The claim in the text applies, at least, to the first of these, to what Grahek calls the feeling of pain. Thanks to a reviewer for bringing Grahek’s work to my attention. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, “Freedom in Belief and Desire,” *Journal of Philosophy* 93 (1996): 429-49, 445. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. How can we be free with respect to, for example, belief when, insofar as we are reasons-responsive, our beliefs are determined by how the world is? Watson writes: “Doxastic control is not opposed to being determined, in accordance with some ‘belief-relevant norms’, by the ‘world’. On the contrary, that is what such control amounts to. Our cognitive lives would be out of control to the extent to which we were incapable of responding to norms of coherence and relevant evidence, that is, were not normatively competent in this way” (“The Work of the Will,” 189). (Watson borrows the expression ‘belief-relevant norms’ from Pettit and Smith, “Freedom in Belief and Desire.”) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Some writers contend that, on the contrary, belief *is* at least sometimes voluntary. See, e.g., Matthias Steup, “Doxastic Voluntarism and Epistemic Deontology,” *Acta Analytica* 15, no. 1 (2000), 25-56; and Carl Ginet, “Deciding to Believe,” in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, ed. Matthias Steup (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 63-76. However, proponents of the Attitude View do not rely on such a claim. Moreover, the claim could not plausibly be extended to the range of attitudes—desire, anger, fear, etc.—our agency with respect to which is said, on the Attitude View, to be the source of responsibility. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. “To perform an action A *voluntarily*, I shall say, is to do A on the basis of an attitude by which I favour doing A, such as on the basis of a desire or decision on my part to do A” (Thomas Pink, *Self-Determination: The Ethics of Action, Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 35). The characterization of direct voluntary control offered by Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” 8, implies, similarly, that one *A*-s voluntarily only if one *A*-s because one tried or chose or meant to *A*. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Pink, *Self Determination*, 48, accepts that, as he uses the term, decision is *not* voluntary. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Watson (“The Work of the Will,” 191 n. 54) discussing a remark by Hugh McCann (“Volition and Basic Action,” in *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 75-93, 92), suggests that forming intentions is voluntary in a different sense from that in which what is done because one intends to do it is voluntary. The former is productive of, the source of voluntariness, as water is productive of, the source of wetness; streets covered with water are wet in a different sense from that in which water itself is wet. Applied to decision, the remark is suggestive, but it leaves unspecified the feature of decision in virtue of which it counts as itself voluntary and the source of voluntariness. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. One might balk at the idea that having an attitude is an activity of any kind, insisting that it is, instead, a state. Matthew Boyle argues that holding a belief is an exercise of agency; see Boyle, “‘Making up Your Mind’ and the Activity of Reason,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 11, no. 17 (2011): 1-24. (He does not there advance a view on responsibility.) [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. The passage quoted from Portmore in the preceding section suggests this alternative. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Hieronymi, “Reflection and Responsibility,” 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. “We are certainly responsible for what we take to be reasons. That is to say, we are open to criticism, including but not limited to moral criticism, for taking things to be reasons that are not and for failing to respond to things that are” (Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, 60). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See, e.g., Alfred R. Mele, *Aspects of Agency: Decisions, Abilities, Explanations, and Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 2. On Mele’s view, deciding to *A* is an intentional action despite rarely if ever being done from an intention to decide to *A*. If it is done from an intention, the intention might be to make up one’s mind what to do. Further, as Mele sees it (and I agree), making a decision is not the only way to acquire an intention. Decisions settle uncertainty about what to do. But often when we act there is no such uncertainty. For example, on arriving at my office door in the morning, I acquire an intention to get my key out of my pocket. But there is no need to make a decision to get the key, for there is no uncertainty about the matter. (The distinction between attitude-actions and non-actional acquisitions of attitudes, then, is not drawn simply by attitude-type, for it can be drawn within a given attitude-type.) [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Hieronymi, “Reflection and Responsibility,” 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Hieronymi, “Two Kinds of Agency,” 139. I doubt that a view of this kind can be generalized to all reasons-responsive attitudes. I do not see that there are any questions the settling of which suffices for anger, or fear, or joy. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. There is an exception when *A*-ing is making up one’s mind whether to *B* (for some act-type *B*-ing). For example, one might decide today to make up one’s mind tomorrow about whether to take a trip next month. Carrying out the decision made today will consist in settling for oneself a further question. But, of course, this is not the common case. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. One kind of case of such failure occurs when one forgets one’s plan. For another kind of case, see Samuel

    Asarnow, “On Not Getting Out of Bed,” *Philosophical Studies* 176 (2019): 1639-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Hieronymi, “Reflection and Responsibility,” 19 n. 32. Note that what is affirmed here is discretion over *action*, not over *intention to act*. She denies that we enjoy the latter: “You can only intend for reasons that you take to show the *action* sufficiently worth doing” (ibid. 18). I do not think that this is quite right; see Randolph Clarke, “Autonomous Reasons for Intending,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86 (2008), 191-212. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Hieronymi, “Reflection and Responsibility,” 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Note that as Hieronymi uses the term, having discretion with respect to doing a certain thing is *not* a matter of being able to do otherwise. Rather, discretion concerns the range of reasons for which things of that kind can be done. So understood, discretion (unlike ability) does not vary from agent to agent or situation to situation; it (or its lack) is a fixed feature of a kind of doing. Thus, debate about whether responsibility requires an ability to do otherwise is orthogonal to the issue here. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. The claim is not, of course, that we are morally responsible *only* when what we do is either morally required or morally forbidden. We can be responsible for conduct that is neither. It may nevertheless be *of a kind* that can be subject to obligation, such that we would be liable to blame were it wrong. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. The example is from Richard Feldman, “The Ethics of Belief,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (2000): 667-95, 671. Hieronymi cites it in her “Controlling Attitudes,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2006): 45-74, 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1995), 125. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. George Sher strikingly denies that we are. He acknowledges that ugly thoughts, fantasies, and desires can reflect badly on one’s character, and that one can be aptly criticized when one’s beliefs reflect prejudice. “However,” he says, “it seems to me that we go badly astray if we take the further step of maintaining that it’s *morally wrong* to have fantasies about molesting children, that it’s *impermissible* to dwell on thoughts of grisly revenge, or that we are morally *obliged* to avoid beliefs that are rooted in prejudice rather than evidence.” See Sher, “A Wild West of the Mind,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2019): 483-96, 484. Sher apparently denies not just that we have attitude-focused obligations, but also that we have obligations bearing on attitude-actions. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Angela M. Smith, “Guilty Thoughts,” in *Morality and the Emotions*, ed. Carla Bagnoli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 235-56, 255. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Graham, “A Sketch of a Theory,” 399-407, also affirms attitude-focused moral obligations, as does Portmore, *Opting for the Best*, 99-100. As I discuss in Section V, Scanlon denies that we have such obligations. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Rima Basu and Mark Schroeder, “Doxastic Wronging,” in *Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology*, ed. Brian Kim and Matthew McGrath (New York: Routledge, 2019), 181-205, 182. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Mark Schroeder, “When Beliefs Wrong,” *Philosophical Topics* 46 (2018): 115-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Berislav Marušić and Stephen White, “How Can Beliefs Wrong?—A Strawsonian Epistemology,” *Philosophical Topics* 46 (2018): 97-114. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. It is an interesting question why recognition of a moral obligation to have such an attitude cannot motivate it. I am not sure what the answer is. One possibility: if one can be motivated to *x* by recognition of one’s obligation to *x*, then one can *x* with the aim of fulfilling that obligation. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. A sample of the debate: Jonathan Dancy, “Should We Pass the Buck?” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*

    47 (2000), 159-73; Philip Stratton-Lake, *Kant, Duty, and Moral Worth* (London: Routledge, 2000), ch. 1; T. M. Scanlon, “Wrongness and Reasons: A Re-examination,” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2:5-20; Mark Schroeder, “Buck-Passers’ Negative Thesis,” *Philosophical Explorations* 12 (2009): 341-47; Stephen Darwall, “‘But It Would Be Wrong’,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 27, no. 2 (2010): 135-57; and Zoë Johnson King, “We Can Have Our Buck and Pass It, Too,” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 14:167-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. For some of the debate, see Julia Markovitz, “Acting for the Right Reasons,” *Philosophical Review* 119 (2010): 201-42; Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, *In Praise of Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch. 7; Elinor Mason, *Ways to be Blameworthy: Rightness, Wrongness, and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chs. 3 & 4; and Zoë Johnson King, “Praiseworthy Motivations,” *Noûs* 54 (2020): 408-30. Note that Arpaly and Schroeder’s target is *attributive* praiseworthiness, and not a mode of accountability. For the distinction, see Watson, “Two Faces of Responsibility.” [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. The expression ‘operative reason’ (and this understanding of such a reason) comes from Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. On this point I am in agreement with Hieronymi. See Pamela Hieronymi, “Responsibility for Believing,” *Synthese* 161 (2008): 357-73, 369. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. I take it that it is impermissible for one to *A* iff one is obligated not to *A*. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” 21-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Michael J. Zimmerman proposes a formula for individuating varieties of moral responsibility such that kind 1 is the same as kind 2 only if the kind (or kinds) of reaction rendered fitting by kind 1 is (or are) the kind (or kinds) of reaction rendered fitting by kind 2. See Zimmerman, “Varieties of Moral Responsibility,” in *The Nature of Moral Responsibility: New Essays*, ed. Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, and Angela M. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 54-64, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Hieronymi takes the presupposition (or, as she calls it, the assumption) of the “why” question to be that one has settled for oneself some question (or questions). “Settling a question,” she says, “is the kind of thing that can be done for reasons” (“Reflection and Responsibility,” 14 n. 26). As I mentioned in an earlier note, I doubt that coming to have a reasons-responsive attitude can always be understood as settling for oneself some question (or questions). Hence my alternative formulation of the presupposition.

    The idea that a particular kind of “why” question is given application with respect to reasons-responsive attitudes is inspired by remarks by G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), §5. Anscombe’s purpose, however, was to identify what is distinctive of intentional action. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. “To say that an agent is morally responsible for something is to say that that agent is an appropriate target, in principle, of requests for justification regarding that thing and that she is eligible, in principle, for a variety of moral responses depending upon how well or poorly she meets this justificatory request” (Angela M. Smith, “Responsibility as Answerability,” *Inquiry* 58 (2015), 99-126, 103). Hieronymi (“Reflection and Responsibility,” 12) maintains that “one is answerable just in case a request for one’s reasons is given application,” and she takes answerability to suffice for responsibility (ibid., 28 n. 47). Scanlon (*What We Owe to Each Other*, 22)states his view as follows: “Because ‘being responsible’ is mainly a matter of the appropriateness of demanding reasons, it is enough that the attitude in question be a judgment-sensitive one—that is, one that either directly reflects the agent’s judgment or is supposed to be governed by it. For this reason, one can be responsible not only for one’s actions but also for intentions, beliefs, and other attitudes. That is, one can properly be asked to defend these attitudes according to the canons relevant to them, and one can be appraised in light of these canons for the attitudes one holds.” [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Note that theorists who identify responsibility with answerability hold that bearing moral responsibility can at least partly justify much if not all of what I characterize as being held to account. See, e.g., Hieronymi, “Responsibility for Believing,” 361; Angela M. Smith, “Attributability, Answerability, and Accountability: In Defense of a Unified Account,” *Ethics* 122 (2012): 575-89, 586-89; and Smith, “Responsibility as Answerability,” 104-6. Although Smith (ibid., 106) denies that legal punishment can be justified *simply* by satisfaction of the conditions of answerability, she accepts that satisfaction of those conditions may well be necessary for its justification.

    Proponents of the Attitude View who do not speak of answerability take a similar view of responses that can be justified by bearing responsibility. Portmore, *Opting for the Best*, 53, includes “retributive attitudes” and sanctions; he emphasizes (53 n. 6) that his concern is with *accountability*. Graham, “A Sketch of a Theory,” includes reactive attitudes, and Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, ch. 4, includes these as well as other modifications of one’s attitudes and behavior toward the blameworthy.

    Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*, chs. 2 & 3, recognizes answerability as a kind of responsibility but distinguishes it from accountability. On his view, as on my suggestion here, answerability does not suffice for accountability. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. See, e.g., Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 187-90; Michael J. Zimmerman, *An Essay on Moral Responsibility* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), 113-19; and Levy, “The Good, the Bad, and the Blameworthy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Adams, “Involuntary Sins,” 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Manuel Vargas, “The Trouble with Tracing,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 29 (2005): 269-91, raises difficulties for a tracing strategy. John Martin Fischer and Neal A. Tognazzini, “The Truth about Tracing,” *Noûs* 43 (2009): 531-56, defend the strategy against some of the difficulties. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Watson, “Two Faces of Responsibility,” holds that there are *two*; Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*, that there are *three*; and Zimmerman, “Varieties of Moral Responsibility, that there are *many* varieties or “faces” of moral responsibility. However, as far as I can tell, none of these theorists take the sources of different varieties of responsibility to vary as I suggest in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. We are morally responsible agents only given that we have a capacity for reasons-responsive conduct; but we need not be responsible for having that capacity. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)