

# Constructing Responsibility

## 1 Introduction

*Two twelve-year old boys, Jerry and Bob, break into a shed, just for the fun of it. Jerry steals a hammer. Bob takes a screwdriver. Afterwards, Jerry continues to steal things and ends up as a criminal, spending time in jail. Bob doesn't steal again but in contrast develops an honest character. He pursues an academic career, becomes a professor of mathematics and a trusted member of his community.*

Are Jerry and Bob responsible for the kinds of people they have become?

This is the kind of question posed by Jonathan Jacobs' book, *Choosing Character: Responsibility for Virtue and Vice*. His book is inspired by Aristotle, but I think it is representative of the way many contemporary people conceive of the issue, and it is for this reason that I consider it worthy of careful examination and criticism.

I will explain Jacobs' response to the question, offer five reasons why I think his analysis is inadequate, and then sketch my own alternative account of responsibility and selfhood.

## 2 Jacobs' Answer

Jacobs' question is whether a person is responsible for their own character. Character must be carefully distinguished from temperament. By temperament he means the innate components of one's personality in contrast to the learned aspects, which is what he is calling character. Anxiousness or aggressiveness for example, are traits of temperament; eating a healthy diet, being honest, or having a disposition to stealing are traits of character. In so far as it is part of our biological nature, we have no responsibility for our temperament. Jacobs' claim is that we are, however, responsible for our own character.

Following Aristotle, Jacobs believes that character should be analyzed in terms of habit. Habits are learned by repetition. One develops an honest character by repeatedly telling the truth; one becomes a thief by reiterated acts of stealing. Typically, habits are learned when young and, in adulthood become established features of one's mature character. Habits can become so ingrained that we cease to deliberate before performing them; indeed, we may become unconscious of them. Changing a longstanding habit may be very difficult, sometimes impossible.

However, even though they are beyond immediate control, habitual acts are nevertheless responsible ones, claims Jacobs; there is no intrinsic dichotomy between being habituated and being

a voluntary agent. One does not act responsibly in opposition to acting habitually: one acts responsibly by acting habitually. This is perhaps easier to see in the case of virtue: I am rightly praised for my honesty, even if I am "the kind of person who couldn't tell a lie," even if it is impossible for me to do otherwise. In the case of vice, Jerry's actions are to be condemned, even though his criminal acts are habits he is no longer able to overcome.

Jacobs' claim that we are responsible for our habitual acts requires that he (like Aristotle) distinguish between two kinds of responsibility. First there is responsibility for the individual actions as such: act-responsibility. Secondly, there is responsibility for the extent to which the act contributes to establishing the long-term habit: character forming-responsibility. In so far as the individual act is voluntary, the actor is responsible in both ways.

Jerry voluntarily steals the hammer, and so is responsible for that individual act. But his act is also the first of many habit-ingraining actions, the series of actions that finally establish his character as criminal. In so far as these actions are voluntary, Jerry is responsible for his ingrained habit and so he is responsible for his mature crimes, even though they are so habitual that he is incapable of doing otherwise.

In this analysis, Jacobs aligns "responsible" with "voluntary:" He treats an agent as responsible for those acts that are voluntary. And he adopts Aristotle's somewhat primitive notion of "a voluntary act" as one that is "uncompelled" (Jacobs 10), or, as Aristotle himself puts it, as one in which "the moving principle is in the man himself" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1110a16). No intention is necessary for an act to be voluntary in this sense: when a two-month-old baby rolls over it does so without intention, but the act is nonetheless voluntary -- in contrast with the case of laughing when tickled, for the tickling is "outside" the baby (Jacobs 13).

I would summarize Jacobs' position as follows:

1. Agents perform voluntary acts -- intentional or not -- for which they are responsible;
2. These acts, if repeated, become habits;
3. When mature, these habits comprise a person's character;
4. Hence people are responsible for their own adult characters.

In the event, Jacobs appears to nuance this summary:

The voluntariness of character does not depend upon the agent acting in certain ways in order that she should have a certain character... But the argument is not simply, "Since action is voluntary, character is voluntary, because action influences character." The argument is that action is voluntary in ways that shape character and that agents can recognize that how they act makes a difference to what characteristics they acquire and which of them become features of fixed character and can regulate the process. (Jacobs 27)

The nuance Jacobs is offering here is hard for me to grasp. As far as I can see, it is related to his concept of "habituation by neglect" (Jacobs 32). To become a mature thief, Jerry does not have to set out actively and intentionally to form his character in this way; all he needs to do is to repeatedly neglect to rein in his impulses to steal. Since each act of neglect is voluntary, he will have chosen his criminal character and so will be responsible for it.

In any case, the nuance is, I believe, irrelevant for my purposes. With or without the nuance, this analysis of responsibility is inadequate on five grounds, which I will discuss in turn, before offering my own, alternative analysis.

### **3 Criticism of Jacobs**

#### ***3.1 No preexisting, substantial self***

My first problem is that Jacobs speaks as if we start off with a self already responsible for its actions. The only question worth asking, it seems, is whether this responsibility extends to character formation. He seems to presuppose an already completed self or soul incarnated into a particular situation, a self that faces the task of choosing its own future character. Not only is temperament innate but, it seems, responsibility is too. The only thing at stake is which habits, virtuous or vicious, it will inculcate in itself.

The notion that a child is but a miniature adult is an intimation of Plato's notion of reincarnation or of Descartes' pure ego. I reject this notion. Responsible selfhood is not a black-and-white issue -- either present or absent. Selves come into being gradually. I do not just mean that there is a self that performs a larger quantity of voluntary actions as it matures. What I deny is that there is a self originally lacking in character who then voluntarily habituates itself to virtuous or vicious characteristics. I maintain that initially, there is no responsible self.

#### ***3.2 Absence of concept***

The second difficulty with Jacobs' account is that he fails to realize that responsibility depends upon the possession of the relevant concepts. Jerry can perform the act of stealing only if he has the concept of property. A bird can pick a berry off a tree, but it cannot steal it, for the idea that the berry belongs to the tree is not in its conceptual repertoire. At 12, Bob understood that the screwdriver properly belonged to its owner and so he was responsible for the act of stealing. But Bob had no concept of character formation, and so he could not have been responsible for this first

step in choosing his character. Perhaps Bob had some notion that people had different personality traits, but the distinction between innate temperament and learned character is unlikely to have occurred to him. Indeed the idea that one's repetitive behaviour forms one's future character is a rather sophisticated concept, one that is unlikely to be universally understood. It may well be unique to the Aristotelian West. Even in our own culture, some who read horoscopes seem to believe that one's adult character is determined by the stars. In some cultures, (early Greek mythology?) one's character was to be explained by an indwelling demon or possession by a god. In any case, if at 12 Bob lacked the concept of habitual character formation, then he could no more have voluntarily and responsibly acted to form his character than a bird can steal a berry.

Jacobs' notion of habituation by neglect cannot rescue him from this difficulty. One cannot neglect to do something one has no concept of. Whether a bird picks a berry or not, it cannot neglect the property rights of the berry's owner. At 12, Jerry's neglect to rein in his thieving impulses cannot be counted as a voluntary, responsible act of character formation if, as I'm assuming, he lacks the concept of character formation. The voluntariness of an action is concept-dependent because actions themselves are concept-dependent. In so far as the action of taking the hammer is conceptualized as stealing, it is a voluntary act on Jerry's part; in so far as it is conceptualized as character-forming, it is neither voluntary nor involuntary: it is simply not an act he could perform one way or the other. It is not in his repertoire.

### ***3.3 Concept of Responsibility***

But my difficulty with Jacobs' approach is more fundamental than these first two objections may suggest. Leaving aside for the moment the problems of character formation, let me say, as a first approximation to my third problem, that one cannot be responsible for *any* of one's actions if one lacks the concept of responsibility itself. A two-month-old baby rolling over in its bed lacks the concept and so, *pace* Jacobs, is not responsible for the behaviour.

To explain this third objection, I need to take a side-trip to examine the concept of responsibility? How can we define it?

The word "responsible" is used in many ways, so let me first narrow down the concept by excluding two uses that, though correct in themselves, do not concern me here.

- *Blaming for wrong acts*

Sometimes when we say, "you're the one responsible for that!" We simply mean, "you're morally to blame for that!" (Ironically, "you're acting irresponsibly" means the same thing.)

This is not the use of the term that interests me. Whether we blame a person for doing

something morally wrong or praise them for doing something morally right, we are still holding them responsible for their action. So there's a wider sense of moral responsibility that applies to any act for which we offer either moral praise or blame.

■ *Strict liability*

Another exclusion: In law, there is a notion of strict liability. If ice falls off my roof and damages your car, I will be held "responsible," and must repair the damage, even if I was not negligent, I knew nothing about the ice and I could not have prevented the accident. In this case, being responsible is tightly related to being associated with the cause. The ice on the roof was the cause, and the roof was on the house that I owned. This legal sense has nothing to do with the notion of responsible action on which I want to focus.

The notion of responsibility that I want to analyze is neither legal nor moral. When I make a move in chess, I am responsible for the action as I would not be if my sleeve accidentally pushed a piece from one square to another. Similarly in art or technology. Shakespeare is responsible for the text of Hamlet. Beethoven is responsible for the well-tempered clavier. But these are not cases of moral responsibility. Responsibility in this more fundamental sense amounts to attributing an action to an agent.

Saying what it is not may be useful, but a positive definition of the concept of responsibility would be more helpful. The trouble is, the concept cannot be defined in isolation. One might think of it as a node in a conceptual network. Only a self capable of integrated, voluntary actions who understands what these actions are and how they fit into cultural scheme of values, norms and laws, and who understands herself as an agent within that scheme can be responsible. This is, if you like, a hermeneutic circle in which each concept is defined in terms of the others. What we need is not so much a definition of the concept of responsibility as a means of gaining access to the circle.

For an analogy, consider Newton's definition of force as the product of mass and acceleration:  $f = ma$ . Unless you already understand the concepts of mass and acceleration, this definition is useless to you. But on the other hand, you cannot understand mass or acceleration if you don't already understand the notion of a mechanical force. You enter the conceptual scheme holistically, not piecemeal. Understanding the concept of force means coming to view the world from the perspective of mechanism.

In the case of responsibility, however, the situation is more complex, for the hermeneutic circle involved is not a purely conceptual or intellectual one; it is also practical. The task is to be a responsible self, to relate to others and to the world responsibly; to act in a certain way. Unlike the

conceptual scheme of mechanics, within which we can imagine (perhaps falsely) understanding from the outside, the scheme that responsibility is embedded in is one in which we must participate. The distinctive characteristic of the hermeneutic circle in which responsibility is embedded is that selfhood is itself within the circle. Unlike the mechanistic circle, in which the self of the physicist conceptualizing the circle is outside of it, selfhood is one of the components that makes up the responsibility circle. Newton's selfhood can be thought of as completed, as fully accomplished when it incidentally turns its attention to the mechanistic relationship:  $f = ma$ . But there is no preestablished self that incidentally takes on responsibility as an ancillary skill. It is by becoming responsible that an organism becomes a self. The task is not just to *understand* the term "responsible", but to *be* responsible.

So, to return from my sidetrip, my most fundamental disagreement with Jacobs (and perhaps with Aristotle?) is that they don't see selfhood as essentially integrated into a constructed circle of meaning. Even the title of Jacobs' book, *Choosing Character*, implies that there is a chooser that, incidentally, selects a character. He seems to presume that if the chooser failed to choose a character, her status as a chooser would remain unaffected. What I am arguing is that to be a chooser is possible only for a being who already has a character. Or, to be more precise, becoming responsible and becoming a self are two equivalent aspects of the one process of entering the responsibility circle.

### **3.4 Attribution, not realism**

This leads me to my fourth, related, difficulty with Jacobs' approach: he adopts a realist interpretation of predication. His question is whether we are responsible for character or not. He seems to assume that this is a matter of discovery: there is a fact of the matter waiting out there in the world to which our judgment, if true, must correspond. This realist conception of truth might work for mathematics or physics (though I doubt it) but makes little sense for responsibility.

Consider the claim that there are 100 cents in a dollar. We can weight the dollar and cents, or measure their length, or subject them to chemical analysis yet fail to find any "fact of the matter" to which the claim corresponds. Only if we adopt a monetary perspective, if we interpret the coins as having monetary value, can the claim be understood. We need to enter the hermeneutic circle within which the pieces of metal are interpreted as money before the claim can be made. This is not a discovery about reality, but an imposition of an interpretive framework onto the coins. Similarly, the claim that we are responsible for character-formation -- or any act, for that matter -- involves the imposition of a conceptual scheme, not the discovery of a fact.

What is more, the interpretive framework is a human construction. Attributing responsibility is more like proclaiming a law than discovering what is already the case. The task facing the Central Bank when it was setting up the Canadian monetary system was not to *discover* the value of dollars, but to *declare* them as equivalent to a hundred cents. Similarly the framework within which responsibility makes sense is constructed by human cultural and linguistic institutions. We are not dealing with the discovery of facts, but with the adoption of a scheme of meaning.

### **3.5 Circle of Meaning**

We can come to a similar conclusion by looking at my fifth problem with the Jacobian account: his notion of habit. I can decide to start my day with a glass of juice. If I do this every day, it becomes a habit so that I am relieved of the burden of making a decision first thing in the morning. I just automatically grab a glass of juice; it is "second nature", as Aristotle puts it. Jacobs proposes that the formation of character can be understood as a collection of long-term habits. Jerry decides to steal a hammer one day; he steals money the next day; then he steals a bike. By the time he becomes an adult he is a hardened criminal whose stealing is so habitual that he no longer has any burden of decision-making for each individual act of thievery. Nevertheless, he is responsible for his character because the habit was voluntarily ingrained.

I think this analysis misses the point. It takes acts of stealing, responsibility and selfhood as preexistent entities that exist as "in-themselves," like birds in an aviary from which we can pick and choose. What I claims is that maturation involves the process of coming to live in a new world; it is the constitution of a new set of meanings. As a child matures, it comes to live in a world in which there are actions for which it is responsible and, correlatively, the child develops a self responsible for these acts. A new way of being in the world is established.

For an analogy, consider access to language. Imagine a theory about the learning of language based on the development of word habits: the child get into the habit of saying "table" in the presence of tables, and "block" in the presence of blocks. Maybe that's what a parrot does; but human language is a quite different matter. Learning a human language involves mastering structures that can be reused indefinitely, that is, grammar. The child can understand "the block is on the table" only if it is possible for her to understand "the cat is on the table" or "the block is on the mat." Of course, she doesn't have to actually say or think these further sentences: but they must be within her competence; they must be among her horizon of possibilities. What she learns is the syntactical form "the X is on the Y". She must master the rules of the game, as Wittgenstein might put it. To describe this as the acquiring of a number of individual habits is to miss the systemic nature of the linguistic world the child enters.

Responsibility is like one structure in a language. Selfhood, responsible action, freedom, liberation, praise, blame, etc. form a systemic network -- a practical as well as a conceptual network -- and it is to this system that the maturing child must gain access. It is not just a matter of developing individual habits, such as honesty or theft, by reiterated practice: it is a question of constituting a world within which responsible actions make sense, a world within which a responsible self can come to be in the first place. The child must enter a circle of meaning. Let me call it the "responsibility circle."

So, to summarize the issues: Jacobs' approach takes selfhood for granted. He assumes a self that is already there responsible for its actions. His only question is whether it is responsible for the formation of its future character. My position is that Jacobs has it backwards. What he is calling character is not an incidental add-on to the self: the self comes into being as its character is being formed. Most importantly, we do not start off life as responsible entities: we learn to become responsible as our selfhood becomes constituted.

## **4 Constituting Responsibility**

My own alternative account to Jacobs' requires us, as should now be obvious, to understand responsibility not as an isolated property of a substance, but as a capacity that makes sense only within a systemic network that involves many other features: selfhood; voluntariness; rules of the game; social and personal norms; political ideals; and so on. Such a network comes into being gradually; it cannot be thought of in all or nothing terms, as black or white, as present or absent. To understand the current structure, we must see it in the context of its historical evolution.

Once again, Aristotle can serve as a starting point. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contrasts movements that are compulsory with those that are voluntary. A movement is compulsory in so far as "the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who is acting" (1110a2). Voluntariness -- which I am taking as Aristotle's stand-in for responsibility -- implies that the principle of movement is inside the organism. Given these definitions, Aristotle points out -- rightly, in my opinion -- that "both children and the lower animals share in voluntary action" (1111b7).

But I would go further. I have argued in previous papers that all organisms, even single cell organisms, have an internal organization that determines which features of the world an organism responds to. An amoeba categorizes substances in its world as food to be pursued or poison to be



avoided. So, while it participates in the physical and causal processes of the world, which causes affect the organism, and which effects these causes unleash is to some degree dependent on what is within the organism. As Aristotle puts it, every organism has its own "entelechy:"

"Entelechy (Gk. ἐντελέχεια) is a philosophical concept of Aristotle that was later adopted by the biological thinker Hans Driesch. From en (in), telos (end, or purpose) and echein (to have), Aristotle coined it to denote "having one's end within", therefore, that something's essential potential is being fully actualised" (Wikipedia "Entelechy").

By Aristotle's definition, since even an amoeba has an indwelling entelechy, the amoeba's actions are somewhat voluntary. I would put it differently. An amoeba and its world form a system. The objects in its world, "food" and "poison", correlate with the internal categorizing structures in the organism -- its organs. (Husserl might see this structure as a precursor to his noetic-noematic correlation.) Within this integrated organ-world system, what happens is partly determined by what is inside the organism. Any account of such a situation solely in terms of physical causation fails to understand the systemic factors involved. Looked at systemically, there is a relationship between the organism (the amoeba) and the event (pursuing food) to which physical accounts are blind. Physically, various different chemical substances provoke the same response. What they have in common is not something physical, but the fact that they all "count" as food for the organism; they "mean" something -- food -- because of the organism's entelechy. The resultant behaviour is no longer simply the effect of the stimulus-cause, for the intervention of the organism's structure introduces a new relationship that defines the behaviour as "pursuing food." If we are careful, and tread tentatively, we can describe this new relationship between the organism and the events that happen as "responsibility." In other words, as long as an entity has enough internal organization that physical causes must impinge upon it only "with respect", we already have a relationship that is, in incipient form, a relationship that on the human level we call responsibility.

So my conclusion is that there is something like responsibility operative wherever there are organisms. Every organism develops a certain independence from the purely physical world and in so far as it does so, purely causal impingements cannot fully account for its behaviour. The organism takes on some "responsibility" for its own actions.

There are many different organism-environment systems produced by evolution. While they all involve some form of "agency" and so "responsibility" on the part of the organism, the human organism participates in systems that are unique. Chess, as Wittgenstein would point out, forms such a system: the rules of the game constitute objects, such as pawns, in the chess world; they define permissible moves, such as check, in terms of these objects; and, notably, they establish the role of a "player" responsible for her moves.

The most uniquely human organism-environment systems, however, depend on language. It is through linguistic interactions that we constitute human selves as entities that are "responsible", in the human sense that we are all familiar with.

It is to this system, already established by biological and cultural evolution, that a human child must gain access as it matures. The task is for the child to become internally organized in such a way that it takes on a system of significance, that it enters the network within which it will become a self whose behaviours are ones that are "responsible." The truth behind the habit analysis of the formation of character is that the mature adult lives in a world that encapsulates its history, both its individual history and the evolutionary history of the species.

## 5 Conclusion

There are two fundamentally different ways of thinking. One starts at the bottom with simple, atomic components that have their being within themselves and then assembles these atoms to explain more complex phenomena. The other starts with the whole, the totality, and from that source derives the structure and being of the parts. Democritus, empiricists and perhaps Descartes are inclined to atomism. My own philosophical heroes, Wittgenstein, Husserl, Dennett, Merleau-Ponty, and perhaps Foucault posit language games, horizons, stances or structures as the basis for understanding. With respect to the issues in my paper today, atomists like Jacobs propose that we start with self-contained egos or selves, acts that are intrinsically responsible ones, and individual habits and that we must use these pre-given components to understand the complexities of human life. Holism prefers to think from the standpoint of networks of meaning, of schemes of significance, and would have us understand selfhood and responsibility as nodes that are defined by and derive their existence from the larger structure, a structure constituted by evolution.

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2009

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