

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY AND WEAKNESS OF WILL

Project: revisit the debate between volitional and non-volitional conceptions of responsibility by focusing on agency in instances of weakness of will.

Central claim: responsibility for weak-willed actions points to a third, more fundamental model of action, action as actualisation, in addition to the models of action as production and action as assertion presupposed by the volitional and non-volitional conceptions.

Weakness of will: points of convergence: responsible behaviour; a form of criticisable irrationality.

Weak-willed actions are free, intentional and uncompelled; contrast with addiction.

Alternative conceptions: acting against one's better judgement at the time of action (Mele 1987); revising one's plans too readily (Holton 2009).

Difficulty: capturing the irrationality of weakness of will without turning it into a concealed form of either rationality or non-rationality (Davidson 2001): weakness of will is still acting for a reason, though in a paradoxical kind of way.

Target of criticism not always clear: constitution of agency, character flaw, unreliability, being less than fully responsive to reasons, or loss of control.

A possible way forward: looking closer into conceptions of responsibility. Two desiderata: 1) unfair to be held responsible for something that is not up to us; and 2) parity of actions and attitudes as possible targets of criticism.

Two major approaches to responsibility: volitional and non-volitional. On the first, responsibility is interpreted in terms of voluntary control. On the second, control is replaced with evaluative judgment or quality of will.

Volitional conceptions of responsibility (e.g. Wallace)

A reactive attitudes account: to understand responsibility, we need to understand first reactive attitudes, such as resentment and gratitude.

Satisfies 1) by clarifying the conditions, under which it is fair for an agent to be held responsible: two powers of reflective self-control: the power to grasp and apply relevant, esp. moral reasons; and the power to control or regulate one's behaviour in light of such reasons.

Central cases: voluntary actions and omissions, i.e. responsibility incurred for violating an obligation, which one is able to both acknowledge (first power) and act upon (second power of reflective self-control). Yet, 2) is rejected:

Particular states of emotion or feeling, however, are not the sorts of states that can directly be controlled by the reasons expressed in moral principles: such states as love, esteem, and goodwill are generally not states that could be produced by the belief that there are moral considerations that make them obligatory. This is why we cannot plausibly interpret moral obligations as governing the quality of peoples' will where such qualities are construed broadly, to encompass emotions and feelings quite generally (Wallace 1994, p. 131).

Responsibility for weakness of will: it looks like a concealed form of rationality – appreciating the better reason and choosing to act against it.

Non-volitional conceptions of responsibility (e.g. Smith)

2) as a starting point:

When we praise or criticize someone for an attitude it seems we are responding to something about the content of that attitude and not to facts about its origin in a person's prior voluntary choices, or to facts about its susceptibility to influence through a person's future voluntary choices. More specifically, it seems we are responding to certain judgments of the person which we take to be implicit in that attitude, judgments for which we consider her to be directly morally answerable (Smith 2005, p. 251).

Central cases: attitudes, such as carelessness and patterns of awareness that seem to exhibit some rational connection to the person's evaluative judgments. However, 1) is rejected.

Responsibility for weakness of will: it looks like a concealed form of non-rationality, on a par with phobias – no rational connection between behaviour and evaluative judgment. A derivative kind of criticism, e.g. uncomplimentary 'aretaic' appraisal or character assessment.

Revisiting responsibility

Both approaches are meant to offer comprehensive accounts of responsibility. Yet, each seems able to do well with some central cases, but not others. Could there be a third, more fundamental conception of responsibility bringing together insights from these two apparently conflicting approaches?

A first step: considering the models of acting responsibly implied by alternatives conceptions.

Volitional accounts conceive acting responsibly in terms of production; non-volitional in terms of assertion.

On the first model, the point of acting is to bring about an effect: hence, the salience of voluntary control. On the second model, the point of action is to assert the agent's evaluative stance. Here, link to this stance is more salient than control.

A possible implication: the volitional and non-volitional accounts of responsibility are not mutually exclusive, since the models of action they build on are not mutually exclusive: typically, responsible actions assert the agent's evaluative stance by bringing about some effect.

There is room for a more fundamental model of acting responsibly: the actualisation model, e.g. by writing well, a person both asserts her positive evaluative stance with respect to the activity undertaken and ensures that the work she produces is good, while at the same time becoming/being a good writer. Aristotelian inspiration: production and assertion are two aspects of success in action that sometimes come apart.

Responsibility for weakness of will: weak-willed actions are successful as productions to the same extent that they are unsuccessful as assertions (Radoilska 2013). Points to a category of necessarily less than successful actions – cannot be fully successful, but are actions nevertheless. Captures well the aspect of criticisable irrationality since the actualisation model satisfies both 1) and 2).

References

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