Who is Responsible to do what for whom?

A Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

It gives me immense pleasure to write this Inaugural Editorial. The *International Journal on Responsibility* has been in development for over three years. With the publication of the first issue, the journey continues. The goal of this multi-disciplinary journal is to explore the practical and theoretical issues involved in the concept of responsibility to ourselves and to others as we navigate a complex social environment.

The focus on responsibility developed initially as a response to the prevalence of John Burton's Human Needs Theory in conflict and peace studies and to the focus on human rights more generally; might humans also have Basic Human Responsibilities that complement Basic Human Needs and rights?[1] If so, what might constitute such responsibilities? Responsibility lies somewhere between freedom and obligation: somewhere between the freedom to do whatever an individual pleases to do and the obligations to perform certain tasks or behaviors. The goal is to promote inquiry into a full range of areas (from interpersonal, institutional, policy, social systems and structures, and global governance) in which humans might incur responsibilities through their actions or inactions and to explore ways to ameliorate human suffering and oppression. Whether explicit or implicit, intended or unintended, our thoughts and social actions have consequences. The scope of the possible topics of the journal is purposely broad, covering all fields of human inquiry.

Thinking and writing about responsibility is inherently tricky. To illustrate, in the 1964 production of *Beyond the Fringe,* the following discussion of responsibility occurs in a segment dubbed the "Great Train Robbery." "When you speak of a train robbery," the Scotland Yard Inspector explains to the reporter, "This in fact involves no loss of train. It is merely what I like to call the *contents* of the train [that] were pilfered." Following further humorous elaboration, the interview continues:

Reporter: Who do you think may have perpetrated this awful crime?
Inspector: We believe this to be the work of thieves…The whole pattern is extremely reminiscent of past robberies where we have found thieves to be

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of responsibility as initially addressed by the Editor-in-Chief, see, *Dissertation:* "From Freedom to Self-Governance: Complementing Human Needs with Responsibilities, A Critical Appraisal." 386 pages. George Mason University, Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (2010); Terry Beitzel "The Process of (Nonviolent) Revolution and Weber's Ethic of Responsibility" *International Journal of World Peace.* XXXI, 2 (June) 2014: 11-34; Terry Beitzel, "Living with Ambiguity, Risk and Responsibility: Ethics and Agency in a Nonkilling Future." *Nonkilling Futures: Visions*. Edited by Joam Pim. Honolulu. University of Hawaii. 2012: 55-96; and, Terry Beitzel, "Virtue in the Nonviolence of William James and Gandhi" in *International Journal of World Peace*. XXX, 3 (September) 2013: 55-83.

involved—the tell-tale loss of property, the snatching away of the money substances. It all points to thieves.

Reporter: You say you feel the thieves are responsible.

Inspector: Good heavens, no! I feel the thieves are totally *ir*responsible, ghastly people who go around snatching your money.

The very word responsibility, as humorously portrayed above, reflects a linguistic irony as well as evoking contradictions, paradoxes, and confusions in describing human agency in relation to circumstance.

The above illustrates the most straightforward modern understanding of responsibility as *criminal* responsibility for our direct actions in violating specific laws. However, a question I always ask of students adds complexity: "When might we be acting responsibly when we disobey unjust laws, such as laws enforcing slavery?" Therefore, responsibility can be formulated in numerous ways and in other contexts —political, metaphysical, moral, command, communitarian, proximal, capacity, and future[2]—that we might incur. How, then, should we think and act in the social world? The world's great religions provide variations on a general theme of responsibility. For example, what Christianity refers to as the "Golden Rule" is found throughout sacred texts:

Buddhism: Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful (Udana-Varga 5, 1)

Confucianism: Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no resentment against you, either in the family or in the state (Analects 12:2)

Hinduism: This is the sum duty; do not onto others what you would not have them do unto you (Mahabharata 5, 1517)

Islam: No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself (Sunnah)

Zoroastrianism: That nature alone is good which refrains from doing another whatsoever is not good for itself (Dadisten-I-dinik, 94, 5).

Given the historical and global reach of these simple principles, why does so much suffering and oppression exist today?

The most obvious answer is that we do not follow the above principles. A more nuanced and complex answer might be that the pretence of doing good—believing that we are being responsible—for others often ignores, obstructs, or masks critical reflection on the motivations, means, and ends of social action. Said another way, in a sermon at Harvard's Memorial Church, the Reverend Professor Peter Gomes stated bluntly: the devil does not bother

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[2] See Terry Beitzel, "Building Peace in the Process of Restoring Justice: A Conceptual Framework for an Inclusive Approach to Peace and Justice in Northern Uganda" *West Africa Review*, 19, 2011: 85-109.

to tempt us in areas of our weakness, we are perfectly human to sin there all by ourselves. It is in our righteousness, in our virtues, where we believe we cannot possibly be wrong, that we are most easily deceived. If that includes too much in terms of religious overtones, atheist Clarence Darrow also claimed: "It is not the bad people I fear so much as the good people. When a person is sure he is good, he is nearly hopeless, he gets cruel." These statements reflect the ambiguous and paradoxical dimensions of responsibility.

The goal of the *International Journal on Responsibility* is to go beyond the above cursory thoughts and statements about responsibility by extending, examining, and debating what responsibility means in numerous disciplines and practices. *IJR* is a forum for theoretical, practical, and methodological explorations into the various and complex issues defined and animated by the question "Who or what is responsible to do what for whom and why?" *IJR* is a broad-ranging journal that incorporates insights from the full range of academic and practical inquiry from the humanities and the social and natural sciences related to addressing the diverse aspects of responsibility.

Now I turn to you, dear colleague, to examine and explore what responsibility means in your field or practice. The exemplary contributors to this first issue come from a range of life, professional, and scholarly experiences. This is expressed from their own unique practitioner-scholarly point of view. I wish to thank them for contributing to the inaugural issue. I should also like to acknowledge the work of Howard S. Carrier, Managing Editor, JMU staff, and numerous others.

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