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*Responsibilities and Taking on Responsibility*

CHESHIRE CALHOUN

HOSTING AND PUBLISHING TALKS IN PHILOSOPHY SINCE 1880

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RESPONSIBILITIES AND TAKING ON RESPONSIBILITY

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Cheshire Calhoun is CLAS Trustee Professor of Philosophy at Arizona State University and chair of the American Philosophical Association's board of officers. Her work spans the philosophical subdisciplines of normative ethics, moral psychology, philosophy of emotion, feminist philosophy, and gay and lesbian philosophy. She has recently published a collection of previously published essays under the title *Moral Aims: Essays on the Importance of Getting it Right and Practicing Morality with Others* (OUP 2016), and a new book titled *Doing Valuable Time: The Present, the Future, and Meaningful Living* (OUP 2018). She is series editor for Oxford University Press's Studies in Feminist Philosophy. Her essay "Geographies of Meaningful Living" won the 2015 *Journal of Applied Philosophy* essay prize; and her essays on forgiveness and civility were included in the *Philosopher's Annual* as one of the ten best philosophy essays published in a year (1992, 2000).

## EDITORIAL NOTE

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There is a familiar, everyday notion of *a* responsibility. Much of daily life on and off the job is consumed with taking care of responsibilities in this sense. But what is *a* responsibility, and how are responsibilities related to obligations? Reflection on the phenomenon of taking on responsibilities suggests that the concept of ‘a responsibility’ is distinct from that of ‘an obligation,’ and that not all responsibilities are also obligations even though many are.

‘RESPONSIBILITY’ CAN BE USED to name quite different sorts of things: one’s causal relation to an outcome, one’s liability to praise or blame, the basic capacities that make one a responsible agent at all, and a commendable trait opposed to irresponsibility. My interest is in a familiar, everyday notion of responsibility that differs from all of these. It is the notion of *a* responsibility. Much of daily life on and off the job is consumed with taking care of responsibilities in this sense. This kind of responsibility is a familiar object of complaint: Some people have too many responsibilities. Some take on responsibilities that they ought not. Some meddle in what is not their responsibility. Some feel their willingness to take on responsibilities is exploited. Sometimes responsibilities seem unfairly distributed.

The responsibilities that have been the focus of philosophical interest have been *role* responsibilities—the responsibilities that come with occupying a particular social role, such as parent, or having a particular job. A central question has been whether roles themselves are a source of obligation, or whether the obligation to execute one’s responsibilities instead derives from morality (Andre, 1991; Dare, 2016). Answers to the more basic question, ‘What *is* a responsibility?’ are harder to find. Two notable exceptions are Joel Feinberg’s discussion of responsibilities in ‘Responsibility for the Future’ (1989b) and Robert Goodin’s in ‘Responsibilities’ (1986).<sup>2</sup> These latter authors, like those writing on role responsibilities, take it for granted that *a* responsibility is something that one is responsible *for* in the sense that one will be accountable—liable to

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1 My thanks to Doug Portmore and James Fanciullo for very helpful comments on earlier drafts.

2 A third exception is Gunnar Bjornsson and Bengt Brulde’s (2017) rather different account in which responsibilities are analysed in terms of required carings.

blame—for failure to execute one’s responsibilities. In short, to have a responsibility is to have an obligation.

My aim in what follows is to explore the basic question ‘What is a responsibility?’ but without assuming that a responsibility is necessarily connected with responsibility in the accountability sense. Indeed, I will argue that some responsibilities are not obligations, and thus not connected with the accountability sense of responsibility.

I have two main reasons for pursuing these basic questions about responsibility. First, the phenomenon of *taking on* responsibilities, although familiar in everyday life, remains philosophically unexamined. It is tempting to think that responsibilities are always taken on through promising, contract, agreement, or the like. Thus, to take on a responsibility is to assume a special obligation. Surveying the variety of ways that responsibilities get taken on suggests, however, that not all responsibilities are obligations. Rather, many responsibilities get taken on in ways that do not bind us, on pain of blame, to future performance. We thus need an account of what a responsibility is and of its relation to obligation that makes sense of taking on responsibilities in these non-contractual ways.

Second, I think it’s worth understanding the normative significance of our having responsibilities. Perhaps responsibilities are normatively significant just because they are obligations. But the complaints I mentioned at the beginning—complaints about having too many, or having one’s willingness to take on responsibilities exploited, or people meddling in what is not their responsibility—suggest that responsibilities might have another kind of normative significance. In particular, those complaints point toward something we might think of as an ethics of responsibility that is not co-extensive with an ethics of obligation. The first step toward exploring an ethics of responsibility is constructing an account of what a responsibility is.

I.

*The Discretionary Judgment Account of Responsibilities versus Mere Duties.* Sometimes when we talk about ‘a responsibility’ we just mean ‘an obligation’ or ‘a duty’. Whatever you are responsible for in the accountability sense of ‘responsibility’ is one of your responsibilities. So, for example, you might wonder, ‘What are my legal and moral responsibilities?’ This is just to ask ‘What are my legal and moral obligations for which I can be held accountable?’ Your responsibilities in this sense include both things you are required to do—as well as things you are required *not* to do, such as defrauding and assaulting. This conception of ‘a responsibility’ has

no distinctive content separate from that of ‘an obligation’ or ‘a duty’, including both general and special obligations.

Sometimes when we talk about ‘a responsibility’, we intend to refer more narrowly to the things one is responsible for within a job or social role.<sup>3</sup> So one might wonder, ‘What are a pet owner’s responsibilities?’ or ‘What will be my responsibilities if I take on this job?’ If the point of talk about job or role responsibilities is just to draw attention a special *source* of obligation—for example, pet ownership brings in its train a set of obligations--‘responsibility’ once again has no distinctive content. The word ‘responsibility’ could be eliminated without conceptual cost from the English language in favor of talk about (role) obligations or duties.

But suppose we take seriously the possibility that talk about responsibilities does some conceptual work that talk about obligations does not. How should we spell out this notion of responsibility? Joel Feinberg (1988-89b) and Robert Goodin (1986) propose this: Responsibilities require the exercise of *discretionary judgment*, and responsibilities involve ‘seeing to it’ that some *goal* or *outcome* comes about. They also propose a contrast between responsibilities and ‘mere duties’.

In ‘Responsibility for the Future’, Joel Feinberg draws the contrast between responsibilities and mere duties this way: ‘[d]iscretion and authority, as well as near unconditional liability to blame for failure... distinguishes the responsibilities of difficult jobs and responsible positions from the mere duties (to obey, to try one’s best) of children, menial laborers, and soldiers’ (1988-89b, p. 95).<sup>4</sup> Responsibilities, in his view, differ from ‘mere duties’ not only in the amount of discretionary judgment involved in determining how to fulfill them, but also in what they require the person to do. One is *responsible for* bringing about a *result*. One has a *duty to* perform an *action*, where ‘the actions that are our duties’, he says, ‘are typically so simple, that assignments of duty need carry little discretion or authority with them. Performance of duty does not generally call for great skill or independent judgment’ (Feinberg, 1988-89b, p. 98). It is because responsibilities are for bringing about a result, not just doing one’s best

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3 And, relatedly, we sometimes use ‘responsibility’ as an equivalent to ‘special obligation’. Having agreed to serve on a PhD committee, I’ve now acquired the responsibility of providing guidance on a thesis—which is to say, I now have a special obligation to do so. If ‘responsibility’ is used to pick out special rather than general obligations, then, once again ‘responsibility’ has no distinctive content and talk about responsibilities could be eliminated in favor of talk about special obligations.

4 Feinberg offers this account of responsibilities in the context of giving an analysis of what he calls ‘discretionary liabilities’. But since his central example of discretionary liabilities are job responsibilities, I am interpreting him as thereby offering an account of responsibilities.

to perform an action, that responsibilities come with ‘near unconditional liability for blame’.

Robert Goodin, evidently agreeing with Feinberg, also proposes that ‘[w]hat crucially differentiates responsibilities from duties is the discretionary component necessarily built into them’ (1986, p. 53). Like Feinberg, he also contrasts duties to do some specific action—like emptying the trash—with responsibilities that set the person a goal while leaving ‘open the choice of actions to be taken pursuant to that goal’ (Goodin, 1986, p. 51).<sup>5</sup> As he says, ‘Duties dictate actions. Responsibilities dictate results’ (Goodin, 1986, p. 50).

Summarizing this account: responsibilities differ from mere duties in involving (1) the use of significant discretionary judgment in (2) seeing to it that certain results come about such that (3) being excused for failure to bring about those results is unlikely.

## II.

*Reasons not to Make so Much of Discretionary Judgment.* There’s something to be said for this account of responsibilities. One thing we often mean when we talk about positions of great responsibility is precisely that occupants of those positions will have to use their own judgment, and they will be held to account for whether they do so wisely and prudently. In addition, there are job duties that it would be odd to describe as responsibilities. One has a duty to show up for work, and to work in one’s assigned space. The Feinberg-Goodin account explains that oddity: showing up and working in one’s assigned space does not involve significant discretionary judgment.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The distinction here between responsibilities and duties probably needs to be understood in terms of degree of significant discretionary judgment involved rather than the total absence of options to use discretionary judgment. As Forrest Schreick pointed out to me, even showing up for work looks like a goal whose realization involves discretionary judgment about how best to go about getting oneself to work on time.

<sup>6</sup> The Feinberg-Goodin distinction between responsibilities and mere duties is also valuable because it invites us to think about how the assignment to some of mere duties without discretionary responsibilities may reduce their autonomy in undesirable and unnecessary ways. It may also deprive them of opportunities to develop the skills, knowledge, and character traits that fit them for assuming responsibilities. In addition, as Feinberg observes, where room for use of discretion is missing ‘--in the plight, for example, of the poor menial laborer whose whole job it is to tighten one screw after another on an assembly line—there is likely to be serious “alienation” of the worker from his work’ (1988-89a, p. 75). The main question, however, is not whether the distinction between required activities that involve significant discretionary judgment and those that do not is worth paying attention to. The question is whether discretionary judgment is a defining feature of responsibilities.

That said, it is a strike against a philosophical account of an everyday phenomenon—in this case responsibilities—if the account does not fit how we actually talk about the phenomenon. The Feinberg-Goodin account does not. Consider, it would not be odd to describe non-managerial jobs—jobs that require very little discretionary judgment—in terms of a list of responsibilities of the occupant, for example, to see to it that all sales are recorded, that clients receive invoices, that the office is locked up at the end of the day, and so on. Outside of the world of jobs, we often talk about divvying up responsibilities that, again, involve little discretionary judgment. Participants in a potluck, for example, often agree to divvy up the food responsibilities, one being responsible for bringing the salad, another the dessert, another the main dish. Finally, those who complain about having too many responsibilities aren't typically trying to draw attention to their being overburdened by the need to exercise discretionary judgment to get results. The office worker who complains about having too many responsibilities may simply be pointing to the fact that too many specific responsibilities have been piled onto a single position, as often happens when companies downsize and the responsibilities from an eliminated position are added to those of the remaining employees.

That discretionary judgment seems central to a responsibility is, I suspect, an artifact of beginning from examples of 'the responsibilities of difficult jobs and responsible positions' rather than the work of 'menial laborers.' The result is that the Feinberg-Goodin account appears to elevate to defining features of what a responsibility *is* features that are distinctive of only some responsibilities, and in particular, features that make those responsibilities *burdensome*. Managerial responsibilities are distinctive, and distinctively burdensome, because significant mental attention, including creativity and careful discretionary judgment, must go into carrying them out. Also elevated to a defining feature of responsibilities is the burdensomeness of being subject to 'near unconditional liability for blame' for failure. Some jobs are indeed burdensome in this way, and (contra Feinberg) not only jobs that involve discretionary judgment. A lot may hinge on the mere office worker locking up at night or correctly tallying debits and credits, and as a result, failures may come with near unconditional liability for blame. In short, job responsibilities can be burdensome in a variety of different ways. That a responsibility requires using discretionary judgment and that the responsibility imposes near unconditional liability for blame are two in a longer list that might include being time-consuming, being unpleasant or pointless, being added on to an already full plate of responsibilities, and so on. Because different responsibilities will be burdensome in different ways, we shouldn't attempt to define what a responsibility *is* by focusing on what makes (some) job

responsibilities *burdensome*. It's one thing to have a responsibility; it's another to have a burdensome responsibility.

### III.

*Are Responsibilities Just Obligations One Takes On?* The one bit left of the Feinberg-Goodin account that I have not criticized, but that I now plan to criticize is the thought that all responsibilities are obligations. More specifically, they are obligations that one takes on—by assuming a job, becoming a parent, adopting a pet, enlisting in the military, and so on. That is, they are special rather than general obligations. As Feinberg puts it, 'Persons take on responsibility quite of their own accord, and when they do, they are committed by their responsibilities quite as much as debtors are by their obligations' (1988-89b, p. 97). Goodin similarly observes, 'Like duties, responsibilities similarly constrain the bearer. In the former case, A is duty-bound to perform (or refrain from performing) certain actions. In the latter, A is bound by his responsibilities to strive for certain goals' (1986, p. 53). If one thinks that responsibilities are obligations, it's then natural to draw a strong connection between *a* responsibility and responsibility-as-accountability. A responsibility is what, prospectively speaking, one will be responsible for in the accountability sense if one fails to execute the responsibility.

What could be wrong with that thought?—it might seem a correct thought. To the extent that it *is* correct—many responsibilities are indeed obligations that one is duty bound to execute—I propose that it is a misleading thought. But more importantly, it is also not an entirely correct thought: some responsibilities are not obligations. In particular, one can sometimes *take on* a responsibility without thereby becoming prospectively liable to blame for failing to carry through. We thus won't fully grasp the nature of taking on responsibilities until we stop thinking that obligation is what's at the heart of a responsibility.

To see what might be misleading about the idea that if one has a responsibility, then one has an obligation—that is, one is duty bound to execute the responsibility—compare these two cases.

1. In virtue of having accepted a job as a faculty member, one has a responsibility to *provide students with feedback* on their work, if only in the form of grades.
2. In virtue of having accepted a job as a faculty member, one has a responsibility to *do service work*, such as serving on college committees, reviewing journal submissions, doing community outreach, or becoming an officer in a professional organization.

Giving students feedback and doing service work are two of a faculty members' job responsibilities. They are obligatory, and blame will attend failure to act on those obligations.

But there is an important difference between the two cases that is obscured by just focusing on the obligatory nature of these responsibilities. The first responsibility sets a quite specific end—providing feedback to one's students—that narrowly directs action by specifying to whom feedback is to be provided, where what counts as 'feedback' is relatively narrowly constrained. By contrast, the second responsibility sets a quite general end—do some kind of service work—but is not similarly directive. Instead it leaves open to discretionary judgment what kinds of service, for whom, and in what amount.

Both obligations come with having taken on the job—it's not elective whether one acts on them or not. But in the second case, it is elective how, for whom, and how much one acts relative to this general end.<sup>7</sup> For any particular service activity—reviewing this manuscript, reviewing manuscripts at all, serving on committees or editorial boards, becoming an officer in a professional association—one has no obligation to do specifically *that*. One volunteers to do these things: one can do a lot of volunteering; one can volunteer for tasks no one else wants to do; one can volunteer to do really important bits of work; and one can do all of this volunteering because others aren't volunteering. To describe all this volunteering as merely doing what one is obligated to do is to misdescribe what's going on. In agreeing to review a particular manuscript or to serve on a particular committee, one is *taking on* a new responsibility, typically because one appreciates the values that these responsibilities serve, and thus appreciates that *someone needs to do* these jobs.

To press this point home, consider one last example:

3. As a professional academic who is expected to value the academic program's success, one has a responsibility *to look after and enhance the welfare of that program and its students*.

This, too, one might think, is a responsibility that comes with the job. By taking the job, one has agreed to adopt the basic values that the job serves and to promote those values. But notice that, unlike the responsibilities to give students feedback and to do service work, this responsibility is unlikely to appear on a list of formal job responsibilities. However, in taking on board the values that the job is designed to promote, the job occupant can see what *someone* needs to do in order to promote those

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<sup>7</sup> Feinberg describes responsibilities like the one to do serve work as 'second-level responsibilities...to take on voluntarily new (first-level) responsibilities' 1986a, p. 81).

values, and thus what would be plausible extensions of her specified job responsibilities. Suppose your department has not institutionalized practice job interviews for students going on the market. You might think, ‘Student success is a main value here, so someone needs to help them prepare for job interviews’. You volunteer to be that someone, organizing some practice job talks and enlisting your colleagues’ help.

It is perhaps true that in taking on responsibility for organizing practice job talks you are acting on a job obligation to look after and enhance the welfare of the program. And it is almost certainly true that having taken on this responsibility you are now obligated to carry through. But in this last case, even more than in the service work example, focusing on the obligatoriness of the responsibilities to enhance the program’s welfare and, subsequently, to arrange practice job talks, misleads. It obscures what is more salient to the person who now is responsible for those practice job talks: she needn’t have volunteered in the first place. In arranging the practice interview, the faculty member electively *extends* her assigned responsibilities, taking on new ones, because she appreciates the values that these new responsibilities would serve and thus that someone needs to take them on. Focusing on the obligatoriness of these responsibilities also obscures the appropriateness of gratitude to those who take on new responsibilities.

A said earlier that a conception of responsibilities as obligations one takes on is not only misleading, but also false. To see the falsity of this conception, consider David Sedaris. Sedaris has become famous for spending three to eight hours a day picking up litter. Testifying before the MPs on the Communities and Local Government Committee, Sedaris said ‘This is something that I can do something about and so it’s my problem...it’s the problem I’ve adopted’.<sup>8</sup> Or consider Ashley the grad student who notices that the department library is in disarray, with many books incorrectly shelved or uncatalogued. She thinks, ‘Someone needs to get this library organized’, and she takes on responsibility for doing so. Having taken on these responsibilities, are either Sedaris or Ashley now obligated to pick up litter or organize the library? Simply making public what they intend to do doesn’t constitute a contract or agreement with others, especially since no one has asked them to do these things in the first place. Perhaps they have invited others to rely on their continued performance. But it’s hard to see why others would be *entitled* to rely on Sedaris and Ashley to continue doing what others could have done, but are unwilling to choose to do themselves. Perhaps in doing librarian sorts of things Ashley has implicitly assumed the role of librarian and

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/house-of-commons-30681168>.

now has role obligations.<sup>9</sup> But roles and their corresponding obligations are institutionalized; and doing librarian sorts of things no more makes Ashley the librarian than doing parenting things for my neighbors' kids make me their parent. In short, they have taken on responsibility for seeing to it that the litter problem and the library's disorganization gets addressed, but they are not responsible *for* carrying through in the responsibility-as-accountability sense of 'responsible for'. They have taken on a responsibility without taking on an obligation.

Of course, *sometimes* taking on a responsibility involves taking on an obligation and making oneself vulnerable to blame for failure. The point of these examples is that this is not always so. In short, just as discretionary judgment turned out not to be a defining feature of responsibilities, so being a binding obligation is not a defining feature of a responsibility.

Now, you might object: where there is no obligation there is no responsibility. If Sedaris and Ashley have not put themselves under obligation, they have not taken on a responsibility. Intuitively, however, it seems right for Sedaris and Ashley both to insist that they are not obligated to do these things and to object that not acknowledging their responsibility-taking is ungrateful. The thought that where there is no obligation there is no responsibility has its source, I suspect, in our not being able to imagine what a responsibility could be if it is not an obligation.

#### IV.

*What Is a Responsibility?* What does Sedaris's adopted responsibility for removing litter share in common with a janitorial staff member's job responsibility for emptying the office trash?

Here is what I propose: *To have a responsibility is to have been assigned or to have self-assigned 'ownership' of an end in a context in which there is a justification for thinking that someone needs to adopt this end and see to it that some of the activities that would promote that end get carried out.* Responsibilities are answers to the question 'Who is to do what *someone* needs to do?'

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<sup>9</sup> Rowland Stout offers an account of generosity as a matter of adopting a role corresponding to a status that you do not have 'in response to a need that is out there for someone to fill a role' (2015, p. 150) and 'being motivated by the considerations that should motivate someone who actually has that status' (p. 146). Ashley the grad student, for example adopts the role or set of commitments corresponding to the status of being the official librarian, although she does not have this status. Both her volunteering to adopt this role and what she subsequently does are gratitude-worthy acts of generosity.

Let's start with the idea that responsibilities are connected with ends. As suggested earlier, ends may be more or less general, and thus more or less connected with a determinate course of action. Consider fairly general ends like the flourishing of a graduate program, the welfare of one's child, or the success of a business. Such ends are general because a wide range of activities are relevant to promoting them, and these are likely to include options that vary in the degree to which they promote the end. As a result, there will be significant room for discretionary judgment in determining both how to go about promoting the end and to what extent to do so. Many general ends are naturally described as 'goals' or 'results' and responsibility for such ends is naturally described as responsibility for a goal or result—as Feinberg and Goodin suggest. But ends can also be quite specific, entailing fairly determinate means of promoting them and thus leaving little to discretionary judgment. The custodian is assigned the specific end of cleaning the offices, the potluck participant is assigned the specific end of bringing the salad. Specific ends are naturally described as actions, and responsibility for such ends as responsibility for phi-ing.

Ends may also be nested, with more general ends providing the justifying reasons for more specific ends. What justifies the claim that someone needs to adopt a relatively specific end is often the fact that a more general end has already been adopted by (or assigned to) an individual or group. That someone needs to adopt the end of preparing conversation starters for a book group is justified by the fact that the group has already adopted the more general end of a successful book group.

In speaking of 'adopting' ends, I don't mean to imply either that the agent has her own reasons for valuing those ends—that they are personal ends—or that she has significant choice in whether she adopts those ends or not. To *adopt* an end, as I use this term here, is simply to guide one's action by reference to that end. Sometimes this reflects the person's own assessment of what is worth doing. Sedaris adopted removing litter from neighborhood streets, as a worthy, personal end—as he says, 'Why should we have to live in a teenager's bedroom? That's no way to live'. Picking up litter reflects his own assessment of what is worth doing, and his adoption of that end was unconstrained. Most people do not adopt the ends specified in their job description as worthy personal ends that reflect their own assessment of what is worth doing. If anyone values those job-related ends, it is company owners or institutional administrators. Employees typically adopt job-mandated ends because they need the job and the paycheck. They adopt ends under constraint. While employers cannot reasonably expect employees (except perhaps high level administrators or workers in vocational jobs) to personally value the phi-ing they are required to do, they can expect of someone who accepts employment that she will treat

her job requirements, and perhaps some of the values of the institution, *as though* they were her personal ends *during the time she is on the job*—that is, that she will care about her job while on the job and see to it that it is done well. In sum, ‘adopting an end’ includes both guiding one’s actions by one’s own chosen values and guiding one’s actions by ends set by others that one is constrained to treat, within a restricted context, as though they were one’s chosen ends.<sup>10</sup>

If we think of responsibilities as the assignment of ends that someone needs to adopt and promote, rather than as obligations, we can capture two intuitive features of responsibilities: they are prospective—future-oriented—and they involve ‘seeing to it’.

If all responsibilities were also obligations, they would be future-oriented in just the way that obligations obviously are: obligations bind across time and thus entail future liability to blame should you fail to fulfill them. I have argued, however, that not all responsibilities are obligations. What we need to capture is the distinctively future-oriented nature of responsibilities, regardless of whether or not the responsibility makes us liable to future blame.

If a responsibility is the assignment of an end to be promoted through positive efforts, discharging responsibilities will involve a pattern of activity across time. Parents are responsible for providing for their children’s needs. While parents are liable for future blame if they fail to do so, what makes the responsibility distinctively future-oriented is that discharging it requires action across time to promote the end of their children’s welfare. Because responsibilities involve the promotion of ends across time, responsibilities *occupy* our time, potentially generating the complaint that we have, singly or in combination, excessively time-consuming responsibilities. And because the essentially future-oriented nature of responsibilities has to do with the promotion of ends across time, rather than liability to future blame, both the responsibilities that we are obligated to fulfill and the

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10 This idea that job responsibilities and possibly the institution’s values are what the employee is to adopt *as though* it were the employee’s end is not as odd at it might at first sound. For Kant, the duty of beneficence requires adopting humanity—persons’ capacity for end-setting--as an end. Doing so entails adopting others’ ends as one own. In adopting others’ ends as one’s own, one starts from the fact that someone else values the activity, person, or thing in question. That one doesn’t value this activity, person, or thing oneself and would never adopt it as one’s own end is beside the point. The obligation is to promote what someone *else* values as an end, because he values it. As in the case of benevolence, so in the case of employment: one is not to govern one’s life generally according to this as-though-mine end, but only on suitable occasions. In the employment context, that means while on the job.

responsibilities (like Sedaris's) that we undertake without generating an obligation will share this future-oriented feature.

If we think of responsibilities as the assignment of ends that someone needs to adopt and promote, it's also possible to explain why responsibilities centrally involve 'seeing to it'. Feinberg expresses the connection between responsibility and 'seeing to' this way:

What we are, strictly (non-elliptically) speaking responsible for is *seeing to it* that such and such is the case. Parents are responsible for seeing to it that their children are kept fed, clothed, and healthy, and that they learn manners. Cowboys are responsible for seeing to it that their animals don't starve, freeze, or get lost. Lee was responsible for seeing to it that the Union armies were repelled. The responsibilities of offices, jobs, task assignments, and businesses are all expressible in the language of 'seeing to it that...'. (1988-89b, pp. 105-106).

Why is it that, 'strictly speaking', what we are responsible for is seeing to it that such and such is the case?—Because responsibilities are assignments of ends to be adopted. And to adopt an end is to make some degree of commitment to seeing to it that the end is realized. 'Seeing to it' normally involves different kinds of things. One kind is 'self-supervisory', to use Goodin's (1986) term: attending to the fact that something is one's end, reminding oneself of what needs to be done to realize it, planning one's time so that getting it done is possible, and motivating oneself. 'Seeing to it' also involves acquiring relevant information and developing necessary skills. Further, 'seeing to it' involves treating obstacles and setbacks to realizing one's end as problems to be solved rather than as reasons to give up the end (Calhoun, 2009).<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, not everything one adopts as an end and commits oneself to realizing is a responsibility. You might have as your personal end learning the rhumba or losing 10 pounds. These commitments to ends are not responsibilities. So why does Sedaris's adoption of removing litter as a personal end count as a responsibility, but your adoption of learning the rhumba as a personal end not count?

Responsibilities arise when 'ownership' of an end has been *assigned* in a context in which there is a justification for thinking that someone

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<sup>11</sup> Rather than 'seeing to it', Bjornson and Brulde work with the related notion of 'caring'. Their idea is that to have a responsibility is to be required to care, where '*To care about x* is to be disposed to react and act in ways conducive to its going well with X in some regard: disposed to pay attention to information that might be relevant for how well it goes with X and to take the fact that some action would make it go better as a reason for action (that is, to be motivated to make it go better)' (2017, p. 17).

needs to adopt this end and see to its realization. Taking rhumba lessons or losing five pounds, however worthy, are not the sort of ends of which we might plausibly say, ‘Someone needs to adopt that end and see to its promotion!’ Cleaning up neighborhood trash is.

The importance of assigning responsibility is perhaps most well-known within discussions of imperfect duties. As Kant understood imperfect duties, imperfect duties are duties to adopt an end. We are, he thought, required to adopt humanity—persons’ capacity for end-setting—as an end, and thus for some people, on some occasions to adopt their ends as our own and to promote them. This is the imperfect duty of beneficence. That all of us have this moral duty, and that providing health care for the indigent or satisfying the material, emotional, and developmental needs of children falls within the scope of this duty obviously does not assure that any indigent person’s health care needs or any child’s needs are in fact met. To assure that those needs are met, someone has to be assigned the end of meeting them; or, as this is typically expressed, an imperfect duty needs to be perfected. So, assigning responsibilities is important to meeting specific needs that fall within the scope of an imperfect duty of beneficence.

Assigning responsibilities is also an important mechanism for solving coordination problems in realizing an agreed upon end.<sup>12</sup> Suppose that you and a group of friends decide you would really like to have a home-cooked meal together. In that context it’s clear that *someone* has to provide the food. But who? If this question is not answered, the participants may arrive on the appointed date to find no food, or food that consists entirely of salads. Ensuring that the end of sharing a home-cooked meal is successfully realized requires settling on an assignment of responsibility for bringing the food. One option is for someone to volunteer to cook the entire meal: ‘Someone has to cook, so let it be me’. Another option is to divvy up the labor, assigning to each person a more specific, subordinate end—one to bring the salad, one to bring the dessert, one to bring the main dish and so on. In this divvying up process, the group thinks, ‘Someone has to provide a salad, let it be Ann. Someone has to cook the main dish, let it be Joe’. Responsibilities are answers to the question ‘Who is to do what someone needs to do’.<sup>13</sup>

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12 As Garrath Williams (2006, p. 214), observes, being assigned specific responsibilities ‘prevent[s] us from being confronted with a plethora of moral tasks with no idea who might tackle which, with boundless responsibilities and a pernicious license to interfere wherever we judge fit.’

13 If the primary work that the concept of responsibility does is to assign ownership of an end in contexts where someone needs to adopt, then highly general ends that everyone is obligated to adopt—for example, promoting others’ welfare—are not paradigm instances of responsibilities. If I stress that it’s *your* responsibility to promote others’ welfare, I may succeed in conveying that it’s up to you to see to it that this

How do such assignments get made? Sometimes institutions or individuals have the authority to make assignments. The law assigns responsibility for the welfare of individual children to parents, welfare agencies, public schools and the like. Employers have authority to determine both what needs to be done within a particular business and whose responsibility it is to see to it that this gets done. Parents have the authority to assign children various household responsibilities.

Sometimes assignments get made by mutual agreement, as in the case of the pot luck participants. Mutual agreements may be inexplicit and the assigned responsibilities less than determinant. A department might implicitly agree that everyone has a responsibility to see to it that the colloquia series is successful and that this means attending lectures, participating in the Q&A, and going to dinner with the speaker; but there may be no explicit agreement on exactly what each individual's responsibility amounts to (attending how often? how frequently participating in the Q&A?). So long as no coordination problems emerge, such inexact and implicit responsibility assignments may suffice to get the job done.

Importantly, sometimes responsibility assignment are self-assignments. Perhaps the most obvious instances are groups that rely on volunteers for various tasks. Such takings on of responsibility are both self-assignments and have the authoritative backing of the individual, institution, or group that is empowered to ask for volunteers. Other self-assignments are purely self-assignments. Recall Sedaris who picks up litter, and the grad student who organizes the library. Both self-assign responsibilities independently of anyone who might authorize their doing so. What 'authorizes' the self-assignment is that there is a justification for thinking that this is something that needs to be done.

The notion of 'needing to be done' might seem worrisomely vague—after all, what exactly counts as needing to be done? To allay that worry consider, first, that justifications for claims that someone needs to do *A* will appeal to the same range of considerations as do justifications for claims that something would be good to do. Depending on the justification, the force of 'needs to' be done will range in degree of imperativeness or urgency. (Compare 'Someone needs to rescue that drowning child' with 'Someone needs to bring the hors d'oeuvres for our pot luck'.)

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happens. No one else has the job of reminding you, nagging you, figuring out how to go about this, and so on. But 'responsibility', when used in cases like this, doesn't do the additional work of specifying what exactly you are to do or how your activity can be coordinated with that of others. And that is work that needs to be done.

Perhaps the intuitively clearest cases of ‘needing to be done’ are those where some fundamentally important moral value is at stake—for example, individuals’ lives are at risk of being lost, stunted, subjected to extreme deprivation, and the like. Sometimes, someone needs to adopt and see to the realization of an end because doing so would partially fulfill an imperfect moral duty. Hospitals, for example, might be under an imperfect duty to care for the indigent—they are morally obligated to do something for at least some of the indigent population. If so, it should be apparent to hospital administrators that some area hospital needs to adopt the end of caring for indigent patients and see to its realization. Here, ‘needs to’ is defensible by appeal to an argument for an imperfect duty of aid.

Sometimes, someone needs to adopt and see to the promotion of an end because it is a necessary means for realizing a more general end that a group has already adopted by mutual agreement. Faculty members, for example, value their graduate students’ success. The shared value placed on student success justifies thinking that someone needs to see to the preparation of students for the job market by holding mock interviews.

Sometimes someone needs to adopt and see to the promotion of an end simply because there is a good reason for thinking the end is valuable or that it serves some defensible, more general value. Sedaris might have justified his view that someone needed to address the litter problem by citing the values of residential aesthetics, maintaining property values, or as he in fact did, the undesirability of living in a teenager’s bedroom. Since what has to be justified is that *someone* needs to do this, the justification must be such that it would equally justify assignment of the responsibility to, or self-assignment of the responsibility by, someone else instead. If only Ashley’s neat-freak interests are served by organizing the library, she takes on an end, but does not thereby come to have a responsibility. If her reasons are instead that the library’s usefulness to grad students is undermined by improperly shelved books and an out of date catalogue, then she takes on a genuine responsibility in undertaking to organize it.

Finally, decision-making about what needs to be done is often invested in authoritative bodies: the law, governmental agencies, institutional executives, business owners and administrators, and organized groups that settle what needs to be done by mutual agreement. Individuals who are subject to these authoritative decisions about what needs to be done, particularly individuals who are then assigned responsibility for seeing to what needs to be done, may well be of a different view about whether a particular end really does need promoting or promoting in the prescribed way. But so long as they remain subject to those authoritative

determinations, they cannot use their private disagreement as grounds for denying responsibility once it's been assigned.<sup>14</sup>

v.

*Taking on Responsibility Badly.* That people elect or volunteer to take on responsibility is, in general, a good thing. There are many goods that someone needs to promote but that neither our conventional moral obligations nor institutional arrangements assign to anyone. Electively taking on responsibility can, however, be done badly.

Individuals who believe they have taken on a responsibility, may be mistaken. There is no responsibility available to be taken on, and this for one of two reasons. On the one hand, what the individual thinks needs doing may not in fact need doing. On the other hand, while there is something that in fact needs doing, the individual is not eligible to take it on. Suppose, for example, that your pet sitter judges that someone needed to put away the credit cards and hide your laptop which you left in plain view of your windows and that someone needed to unplug your coffee pot lest it catch fire. He takes responsibility for hiding the credit cards and laptop and unplugging your coffee pot. You might reasonably complain that none of these things actually needed doing. No one was likely to peer through your windows and break in, nor was your coffee pot likely to catch fire. You might also reasonably complain that even if these things needed doing, a pet sitter is not eligible to take on responsibility for them. Only those in whose sphere of responsibility a task falls have the standing to take it on. The pet sitter's sphere of responsibility is limited to taking on responsibility for promoting ends related to your pets, such as taking them for emergency veterinary treatment. The responsibility to see to it that the credit cards and laptop were safely hidden away, and the appliances were unplugged, was arguably yours alone. Attempting to take on (or over) those responsibilities is meddlesome or paternalistic (de Ruyter, 2002).<sup>15</sup> Determining whether there was in fact a responsibility available to be taken on is particularly important in assessing individuals' complaints that they have too many responsibilities. It's possible to be overburdened with

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14 The faculty member, for example, who finds most colloquia lectures uninteresting cannot use this as reason for thinking he has no responsibility to attend lectures if there has already been a collective agreement that everyone shares responsibility for seeing to the success of the colloquia by regularly attending. Individuals who dissent from authoritative determinations about what needs to be done might nevertheless justifiably think 'Someone needs to contest this arrangement', and perhaps also, 'Let it be me!'

15 See Stout's related account of presumptuous (and thereby failed) attempts to be generous (2015, especially pp. 143-45). 2

‘responsibilities’ as a result of making mistakes about what in fact needs to be done and about one’s eligibility to take on particular responsibilities.

When there is a responsibility to be taken on—it needs doing and one is eligible to take responsibility for it—responsibility can still be taken badly. One can take on responsibilities badly by volunteering to do what one knows one is incompetent or insufficiently motivated to do. Otherwise competent or motivated individuals can overload themselves with more responsibilities than they can handle thereby rendering themselves incompetent, and possibly undermining motivation through burn out. Furthermore, in contexts where only one or a few need to take on a particular responsibility, taking on that responsibility will entail precluding other potential candidates from doing so. This adds to the badness of volunteering to do what one knows one is incompetent or insufficiently motivated to do: not only is one likely to botch the job, but one has prevented someone who would not botch it from taking on this responsibility.

When others fail to execute their assigned responsibilities, stepping in and taking on those responsibilities is sometimes very tempting. But this isn’t always a good thing. It can be insulting. When there’s no critical urgency that someone fill in the gap of someone who has fallen down on the job and could be given a second chance to come through, taking over the job sends the insulting message that the person is incompetent or untrustworthy at their job.

A different kind of badness can infect taking on responsibility for *organizing* a collective activity to promote something of value. Willingness to take on organizational responsibility for collective endeavors is indeed important. But there can be a fine line between taking *on* organizing responsibility and taking it *over*, monopolizing or hogging responsibility. ‘Taking over’ can take different forms. One can take over responsibility for more precisely defining what exactly the good to be promoted is thereby excluding others from having a say in articulating the end of collective activity. Or one can take over responsibility for defining the specific responsibilities that will need to be assigned, again excluding others from having a say. Or one can take over responsibility by assigning to oneself too many of the specific responsibilities, so that others are excluded from substantive or meaningful participation. Although having responsibilities is a burden, being assigned or granted the option of taking on responsibilities is also a way of being recognized as a valuable contributor to group projects.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> As Garrath Williams notes, ‘Insofar as our institutional roles grant us some sphere of responsibility, they recognize us as contributors to project with which they are bound

Here the primary complaint is not that taking on responsibility is mistaken, meddlesome, paternalist, or insulting, but that it is undemocratic. Given the potential for disagreement about both the ends of collective activity and the means of achieving those ends, as well as the importance of having opportunities to participate in meaningful activities, taking on organizational responsibility in a way that is undemocratic and non-participatory is disrespectful. It treats the others to be involved in collective activity as instruments to one's own conception of the end to be promoted and one's own assessment of the means to doing so, or it marginalizes members of a collective.

## VI

*Conclusion.* I have been arguing for a conceptual distinction between 'an obligation' and 'a responsibility.' Obligations pick out what one will be liable to blame for failure to do. Responsibilities answer the question 'Who will do what someone needs to do?' Though conceptually distinct, in real life many, though not all, responsibilities are also obligations.

The account of responsibilities that I've offered highlights the way we volunteer to take on responsibilities, we extend our sphere of responsibilities, and we solve collective action problems by divvying up responsibilities. In so doing, the account invites us to think about ways we can volunteer to take on, extend, and divvy up responsibilities badly. Among the options are these: meddling in or attempting to take on responsibilities already assigned to others; monopolizing or hogging responsibilities, precluding others from meaningful participation in achieving collective goals; insultingly taking over the responsibilities of someone who has fallen down on the job; and taking on responsibilities one is incompetent or insufficiently motivated to act on, or rendering oneself incompetent by taking on too many responsibilities

Such possibilities for taking on responsibility badly mean that those who take on responsibilities may be called on to render an account of (and should antecedently have thought about) why there is a responsibility to be taken on at all, why the responsibility does or should fall within their sphere of responsibility, what qualifies them to take it on, why it should be themselves rather than someone else who takes on this responsibility, why so many responsibilities are being taken on rather than divvied up among a group, and how taking on responsibility is compatible with respecting others.

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up'. (2006, p. 214)

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