

Responsibility, Obligations, Rights Gabriel Moran

Responsibility is a way of understanding human beings in their relation to one another and their relation to the environment. The omnipresence of the term responsibility in ethics and popular speech is both an encouraging sign and a somewhat suspect development. The term is constantly used as if everyone knows what it is, and that the only problem is that we do not have enough of it. I think one has to dig down into the historical and philosophical roots of responsibility before deciding how helpful the term can be and how it can best be used.

The frequent pairing of the term responsibility with rights (“we need not only rights but responsibilities”) undermines the value of responsibility. Rights are best paired with duties or obligations. “Responsibility” is best used for embracing the relation between rights and duties. That understanding of responsible is important in education where a child learns to be responsive and responsible which will lead to awareness of duties. These days a child will also quickly learn that he or she has rights along with the duties. Historically, that is the way that the concept of rights originated: that is, because responsible people have duties they also have rights.

That sequence is not looked upon as an attractive approach to ethics today. Instead, first comes assertion of rights and then someone or some institution attempts to tack on responsibilities. It must be admitted that starting with duties does not have much chance of succeeding. The listing of people’s responsibilities when the term is simply used as a synonym for duties does not fool anyone. However, if one understands responsibility as fundamental to human existence from the time of birth, the question becomes not how to make people accept their responsibilities but how does one become a more fully responsive and responsible human being.

Responsibility is one of the terms that the contemporary world holds on to from the past although it may have lost the premise with which it would be effective. Responsibility arose from a religious context in which human beings were thought to be *responsible to* a judge who is greater than human beings. Humans lived under a judgment about their lives as a whole. Today “responsibilities” are simply asserted as a price paid for the “rights,” that are the most popular of ethical ideas. However, the link between rights and responsibilities is not obvious. Most people are aware of what their rights are; what their responsibilities are lacks a similar clarity.

Environmental literature (or “environmental ethics”) comes the closest to recognizing the problem. Why should humans act ethically? The answer given is that they should do so because they have a responsibility to the earth that gave them life and continues to nourish them despite their lack of gratitude. This acknowledgment means that human beings are not autonomous – a law unto themselves – which has been a principle at the heart of modern ethics. Human lives depend on an unimaginably complex web of life. A religious or mystical attitude surrounds much of environmental literature.

Unfortunately, however, environmentalists unwittingly subvert human responsibility when they insist that humans are not a superior species. They are right that human beings should have some humility in interacting with their earthly kin. In measurements of size, speed, or strength the humans are nowhere near number one. But in having responsibility to other species the humans are the superior animal. They are responsible *to* the whole world and they are responsible *for* not destroying life on earth.

The first chapter of the Bible in which God gives the man dominion over the earth is often cited as representative of the wrong attitude toward the nonhuman world. But the second chapter of the Book of Genesis in which the man and the woman are made guardians of the garden is worth considering. Jews and Christians are given the mission of listening to the whole world and to care for what surrounds them. Jewish and Christian attitudes have often betrayed that mission. Nonetheless, the contemporary world might learn from the image of the humans as the responsible animals which has its roots in Christian and Jewish traditions.

The term responsible originated from a mixture of Jewish, Christian and Roman elements about two thousand years ago. The word has a Latin origin and did not have an exact equivalent in Greek. "Responsibility" gets attributed to Aristotle; however, Aristotle's visual imagery clashes with responsibility which is an oral/aural metaphor. The Greeks also lacked the concepts of psychological freedom and freedom of the will which are presupposed by responsibility.

Responsibility originated in connection with the emergence of the individual - the child of a heavenly father - in pharisaic Judaism. The other necessary element for the emergence of responsibility was the sense of judgment; that is, the belief that the individual must answer for his or her life's actions. The legal thinking that blossomed in both Latin Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism joined with the Hebrew Bible to produce a description of the human being as responsible.

It is important to allow into the discussion every voice for exploring the meaning of responsibility. I do not presume that responsibility is exclusively the concern of ethicists or people who are said to be ethical. Much of contemporary discussion assumes that some people are responsible and other people are not. Responsibility is widely praised, especially by rich, powerful, successful and upright people who confidently assume that they have "taken responsibility for their lives." The economist Esther Duflo says that we ask of the poor "Why don't they take more responsibility for their lives?" And what we are forgetting is that the richer you are the less responsibility you need to take for your own life because everything is taken care of for you....Stop berating people for not being responsible and start to think of ways instead of providing the poor with the luxury we all have, which is that a lot of decisions are taken for us."¹

Responsibility is a characteristic of all human beings and at least some nonhuman beings. The root meaning of responsible is "able to answer a word that has been spoken." This spoken word can be human speech or a metaphorical extension of it. And the answering can be performed by every human being, including infants, people who are called mentally retarded, hardened

criminals, people dying of old age. The responsible answer in some situations can take a form other than the words of human language. Some physical or mental act could be the acknowledgment of the spoken word that has been heard.

Some nonhuman animals clearly fall within this meaning of responsible. Anyone who spends time with a dog, a cat, a horse, a dolphin, or a chimp knows that at least some animals are able to respond to a word that has been spoken to them. One of Descartes' strange doctrines was that (nonhuman) animals are mechanisms.² From Descartes' era until Darwin's revolution, the "beast" did not fare well; it was an object for disposal by rational man. Darwin's work began a restoration of continuity between human and nonhuman animals. Darwinian evolution could have been seen as a return to a pattern that was described unscientifically in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. Each kind of thing developed in its time until God said to the other animals: "Let us make man in our image." There has been much discussion in recent years over the "dominion" that the Bible accorded to humans. Clearly, the humans were special in what was expected of them. The second chapter of Genesis clarifies the mission.

Various degrees of responsibility can be attributed to the other animals. A horse or a dog can be disciplined (taught) by a trainer to respond in one way rather than another.³ Sometimes we even hold something close to a criminal trial for a nonhuman animal. If a pit bull attacks a child, it is likely to be restrained or killed. Words such as vicious, savage or criminal are used to describe the animal. We stop short of imputing guilt to the dog but we do hold it responsible for its behavior even though the dog's owner may be largely responsible for the dog's bad behavior. The inclusion of nonhuman animals as responsible can throw light on key distinctions within human responsibility.

Responsibility has always been more important than one virtue among many. There are no classical accounts of a virtue of responsibility and no medieval treatises on the subject. The word itself lay mostly hidden until the eighteenth century but it underlies the Jewish and Christian sense of what a human being is: the being who listens and responds to the one who is creator of the universe and its ultimate judge.

The line between moral and non-moral responsibility is very often unclear and the line can move during the course of one's life. The context for understanding morality is lost if responsibility is equated to *moral* responsibility. It is important to recognize that we often do not know if a person is morally responsible for a bad action, even when we judge that the behavior (the external aspect of human action) is unacceptable. Courts have to judge whether a defendant is legally responsible, that is, guilty or innocent before the law. Fortunately for all of us, the judgment of moral guilt can only be tentatively and fallibly rendered by any human court of opinion. If there is an evaluation of one's life as a whole, it cannot be done by any human judge.

Responsible to and Responsible for

Responsibility in the life of the human being has two elements: listening and answering, or being *responsible to* and *responsible for*. The process of acting responsibly is a dialectical play between these two different actions. The first moment of responsibility is listening, that is, being responsible to someone or something. The second moment is replying: one is responsible for the action that follows upon listening. This dialectical exchange then issues in a third moment, namely, responding to what one has been responsible for. This interplay continues throughout a person's lifetime. At any moment, I can only be responsible *for* what I am responsible *to*. But what I am responsible *to* is dependent on what I have previously been responsible *for*.⁴

This interdependence of responsible to and responsible for may seem to doom the human being to a closed cycle of determined behavior. Can there be any moral progress if I am responsible for my actions only insofar as I am aware of responsibility, an awareness which is itself dependent on how moral I am? Human beings are, indeed, strongly conditioned by genetic makeup, early experiences, and their physical and social environment. It is easy to show that human beings are not free in the way that they often imagine themselves to be. Some of evolutionary biology today seems ready to close the circle and exclude freedom.⁵

The human being would indeed be left to fate if the sense of responsible *to* is omitted or if it is underdeveloped. Freedom depends on attentiveness to what is happening and on a capacity to reflect upon *previous* actions in a way that gradually widens the cycle of responsible to and responsible for.⁶ A failing in responsibility often lies in what is not done because we are unaware that it should be done. The failure to attend – to be responsible to – is often at the base of moral fault. Ignorance can be culpable (morally even if not legally) when we could have known and should have known but we were selectively unaware.

Until the late nineteenth century, the word responsible was nearly always followed by *to*. The action of a person depended on to whom or to what it was a response. The first use in the Oxford English Dictionary refers to a legislature being responsible to the people.⁷ Of course, it was assumed that responsibility for particular actions would follow, but the basic meaning of the word was answering to someone or something.

Responsibility to. The first question of responsibility is to whom and to what should one listen. The short but comprehensive answer is: One should listen to everyone and everything. Obviously that is not an efficient strategy. We need help to sort out the many voices in our heads and to interpret what we are summoned to; we need the help of a trusted guide. Nevertheless, at particular moments the important word may be spoken by friend or stranger, young or old, living or dead, brilliant or slow-witted, human or nonhuman. Responsible human listening cannot in principle be closed to wisdom coming from any source.

In practice, all of us adopt guides and guidelines that we rely upon. A parent or a friend may be the chief guide when we are young. A scholar or a school of thought may later gain our trust. A religious tradition is a guide for how to interpret the whole of reality. Jewish and Christian traditions say that God is more likely to speak here rather than there, but listen carefully because

it could be just the opposite. Those who demand a premature certainty are likely to become attached to one set of ideas that increasingly filter out much of the beauty and meaning in life. The alternative to a system of fixed certainties is a gradual growth in certainty as one's life is lived in response to the best lights that one has at any moment.

The first step in a life of moral responsibility is the receptive phase. Morality begins not with right, duty, law or decision but with the readiness to receive. Giving and receiving are opposite ends of a single relation; there is no giver without a receiver. In human exchanges, receiving is a form of giving oneself; the giver therefore receives in giving.⁸ Human gifts keep moving until they return to the giver. If the circle is too small, the sense of gift may become replaced by the calculation of self-interest. If, in contrast, one passes on the gift without calculating the return, the circle keeps expanding.

The test of who is my neighbor was already conveyed in the Hebrew Bible by the question: What will you do for the stranger who is in need? This understanding of the love of neighbor was illustrated in many of Jesus' parables, such as the story of the Good Samaritan. The person who is my neighbor is not always the person closest to me. The neighbor may be the one who is farthest from me.⁹

In summary, the meaning of "responsible to" should be as broad and as deep as is possible. In practice, breadth and depth stand in some tension so that we have to look for the best combination of them. One friend's advice may be too little, but the advice of ten colleagues may be too much, especially if none of the advice comes from the depths of friendship. Ten historical documents are not more revealing than one document that speaks to the heart of the matter. There are no clear rules for how each of us combines a broad-based response and a response from the depths of the self. We are not certain of the best way to respond in a given situation, but we can surely be aware that a narrow and shallow response is the wrong way.

Responsible for. If we are responsible *to* in the best way that we know how, we will get a more precise understanding of what we are responsible *for*. A vague, narrow or shallow understanding of what we are responsible to will lead to a distortion in what we are responsible for. One such distortion takes the form of an aggressive seizing upon some activity as a quick resolution of life's problems. People "make decisions" to change careers, choose a marriage partner, lose fifty pounds, or quit school, without attending to important voices that are outside themselves and without lining up support within their own bodies for whatever is decided.

The extreme case of this distortion is the terrorist who "takes responsibility" for a bombing. All the terrorists in the world seem to speak the language of responsibility. I suspect that having been hectoring to take responsibility for his life, the terrorist says: "You want me to take responsibility. Here it is." The distortion of responsibility by a terrorist is easy to recognize but there are many subtle distortions in relation to what we are responsible for. We are often mistaken in understanding our responsibility: 1) for other people 2) for our own life 3) for things.

1) I am not responsible for other people, except insofar as they cannot perform some needed act. We are regularly urged to take responsibility for others. So widespread is the belief that we should be responsible for other people that the opposite is often judged to be morally reprehensible. The favorite phrase here is the bible's "my brother's keeper."¹⁰ The murderer Cain asks "Am I my brother's keeper?" When the phrase is invoked today the assumption is that the obvious answer is yes. But in the bible God does not deign to answer the question. If God had answered Cain, I think the reply might have been: "No, I did not ask you to be your brother's keeper. Brothers are neither for keeping nor for killing. I asked you to be your brother's brother"

My first responsibility for actions in regard to others is to be responsible *to* them. Then the action will be in the best interest of what relates us: if a brother, love; if an enemy, reconciliation; if a stranger, care for her or his needs. If one assumes a world of isolated individuals, then the question is: Should I be responsible for myself alone or should I also be responsible for other people. But in a relational world, the question is: Should I be responsible *for* other people or responsible *to* other people. The latter is the way that my responsibility respects the freedom of other people and discovers what they need.

Professional people, such as politicians, physicians, and priests, need to be regularly reminded that responsibility should not creep over into paternalistic usurpation of the other's freedom. The exception for taking responsibility for others is that each human being does have times when he or she cannot do some things for himself or herself. That is the case for all of us when we are very young; a one-year-old cannot prepare its dinner. The same case may be true for people who are very old and near death. The situation of an old person who is not able to act for himself or herself has become increasingly common. And throughout the life of each person, events may temporarily prevent a person from acting on his or her own behalf.

If a person's incapacity to act is temporary, someone else has to supply actions for as long as and to the extent that the person is incapacitated. Toward the end of life this incapacitated condition may be permanent, and someone may have to decide to discontinue mechanical means that are being used to keep a patient alive. Continuing to use a respirator or a feeding tube is a human decision just as much as is terminating its use.¹¹

When someone else has to be responsible for our actions, we hope that it will be a family member or a friend who has our best interests in mind. Lacking that, we can hope for an ethics committee in a hospital to defend our interests. Any of us may become responsible for acting on behalf of a stranger. If I come upon a crime or an accident and a person needs medical help, I can be morally responsible for getting that assistance. The United States does not have a "good samaritan law" that would hold the bystander legally responsible. Nevertheless, if I am the person on the scene, some action is morally called for, if only to dial 911.

2) I am responsible for those actions over which I have sufficient control; I am not responsible for my life. Each of us is the product of heredity, environment, and early nurturing that leave some of our behavior beyond a direct or immediate control. Some people have truly severe

addictions that make their lives a mess. Each of us has impulses, drives, and attachments that are incomprehensible to ourselves. But except for extreme cases, people retain the ability to reflect on their actions and to take a step away from their worst behavior.

Freedom consists mainly in the ability to say no. At times (in a prison, or within an unhappy family, or working at a needed job), there may not be anything more one can do except to say no, but that ability can be the difference between retaining the dignity of a human being and sinking into an inhuman state. By repeatedly saying no and doing what is possible at any moment, a person may gradually widen the area of behavior over which he or she has moral responsibility.¹²

In acknowledging moral responsibility for actions over which I have sufficient control, the qualifier, “sufficient,” is necessarily ambiguous. Sometimes I am certain of being morally responsible for an action; the action is thoroughly mine.¹³ Sometimes I am uncertain if I am morally responsible because of external or internal pressures. If I sometimes cannot judge my own moral responsibility for an action, all the more is it true that I cannot judge other people’s moral responsibility.

While I should accept responsibility for some actions, I think one should avoid the claim that “I take full responsibility.” The person who makes that claim is usually caught within a complex set of circumstances. The person may have done some horrible deed and cannot understand his or her own motives. Or the person is a member of an organization that is involved in some serious wrong-doing. In such cases, the individual cannot take full responsibility because it is not there for the taking. If the person is famous, the news media demand that he or she come forth and take full responsibility for whatever bad thing has happened. Then there is a public ritual in which the person says “I am sorry. I take full responsibility for what I did.”

This ritual of saying “I take full responsibility for what happened” is usually misleading. The person who has an understanding of responsibility will realize when a particular moral failing is serious; he or she will be determined that it will not happen again. The person is prepared to say: “I accept responsibility for my part in this wrong doing. I do not fully understand how this happened. I am taking steps a, b, or c to prevent a recurrence. I am going to a therapist, or I am joining a support group, or I am resigning from my position in the government.”

Throughout the course of one’s life, responsibility is for particular actions. My life as a whole is not available. Telling someone to “take responsibility for your life” is not helpful and can be depressing. The person who receives such advice cannot get control of his or her life by a decision. What a person can do is accept some responsibility for the action that he or she is about to perform. In taking that one responsible step the person might begin to reorient his or her life.

3) I am responsible for the things of creation that cannot be responsible for themselves. Ironically, we often reverse these principles and assume that we are responsible for people but not for things. It is things that we are clearly responsible for. The things sometimes include nonhuman animals but the ability of animals to decide many things for themselves should be

respected. Vegetative life and non-living things, as far as we can determine, cannot decide anything. Human beings need to accept responsibility for protecting the environment and caring for individual elements within the environment. Sometimes that means aggressive action on behalf of a river, a forest, or an ocean front. Sometimes human responsibility is exercised by non-interference, leaving intact the cycle of living things.

Responsibility as Personal/Corporate

Max Weber was correct in saying that modern capitalism makes it difficult to say who is responsible for what. The problem should not be exacerbated by a radical individualism that regards institutions as completely impersonal, that is, other than us. One of the distinctions that most hampers a discussion of responsibility is the assumed contrast between individual responsibility and social responsibility. The contrast is deeply ingrained in modern politics, economics and ethics. But the language of individual and social is not up to the task for which it is invoked. It does little to control the rapacious aspects of the economic system. Social responsibility cannot encompass the complicated organizations of today nor the human relation to the physical environment. Both the political right wing and the libertarian left love the term responsibility, by which they mean individuals being responsible for their individual lives. They simply block out the fact that individuals exist in an unimaginably complex web of human and nonhuman relations.

One must start with a distinction that relates personal and impersonal, rather than with the dichotomy of social and individual. Responsibility is always personal/corporate, that is, every act of responsibility is both a personal action and within a corporate structure. At the center of response is the understanding and freedom of a personal being. The context of every moral decision is corporate or bodily existence. Corporate existence begins with the physical organism and extends into innumerable bodily organizations.

The term personal carries connotations that the term individual lacks. The individual is a unit in actuarial tables, economic forecasts, and scientific surveys. The term person connotes a responsible being, an actor who has to negotiate a decision with his or her bodily self, past as well as present. The lack of unity in a person is not best described as a conflict between body and spirit or as an opposition of reason and passion. In a negotiation of speaking and listening, the choice is between a superficial reason and a deeper reason that includes passion.¹⁴ The actor in life always has conflicts in reaching a coalescence of character.¹⁵ No one is transparent to himself or herself; one's own motives are never entirely clear. We often ask: Why did I do that? Should I have acted differently? Hannah Arendt wrote that only bad people have clear consciences. The rest of us live with moral ambiguity, aware of our failures and the need for forgiveness.¹⁶

A corporation is any organization or institution, any body that is visible in space and time. A human body is a corporation, as also are the Boston Celtics, the United States Senate, the city of Rome, the American Medical Association or Exxon Oil. It may seem quixotic to attempt retrieving the term corporation from its nearly exclusive control today by the business world. In

support of such a project, I offer three points of evidence: First, there is no etymological reason why the business world has any more right to the term corporation than any other body. Second, corporations outside of the business world have been recognized as legal persons for over a thousand years.¹⁷ Third, many religious, political and educational organizations today retain a share of the term corporation as non-profit organizations. Exploring responsibility requires preserving and shoring up “corporation” as the name for dozens of settings in which people act each day.

There is not one set of ethical rules for business and a different set for actions elsewhere. The business corporation is continuous with other corporateness in human life. This fact does not preclude distinguishing between natural persons and artificial persons in legal rulings. The 2010 Supreme Court case, *Citizens United*, allowed business corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money in political campaigns. The deficiency in the decision was not the consideration of corporations as (artificial) persons. The decision was obtuse in not acknowledging the size and economic power of some artificial persons.¹⁸

The business corporation has points of similarity with other organizations (families, schools, political parties, sports teams) in its need to devise ways for the responsible exercise of its power. It has to give protection and support to the exercise of responsibility by “natural persons” within the organization. The structure for responsibility in a business or another kind of corporation must have a responsibility to its own members.

Responsibility for a natural person requires listening to and responding to the main corporate structures that are extensions of a natural self. On extreme occasions a person’s responsibility can involve a total refusal to cooperate with one of the formative institutions of one’s life. For example, one might responsibly resist if asked to fight in an immoral war or to sell a deadly product. An exercise of one’s moral responsibility may require one to leave the country, go to jail, quit one’s job, or blow the whistle on one’s employer.

No such steps should be taken precipitously without exploring other possibilities and without measuring one’s ability to bear the burden of heavy responsibility. Most of the time, less dramatic action is called for. In most jobs, one can exercise responsibility by responding to one’s boss, letting him or her know if something is wrong. If that does not work, there should be other means available to handle such problems, and if there are no other means available, one’s responsibility may include trying to develop them. Going to the local television reporter or to *60 Minutes* is a last resort and not usually a career-enhancing move.

No one has the luxury of thinking that he or she is uncontaminated by the ethical problems of today’s business corporations. We are all responsible *to* that world and, depending on our roles, we are responsible *for* some part of that world. Our responsibility varies in an organization according to the position we occupy: customer, neighbor, employee, member, director, owner.¹⁹ If I am a neighbor to a business corporation, I usually have no responsibility for the company’s activities, but it probably has some responsibility for actions affecting my well-being. If I buy a

product from a company, I share responsibility – if only in a minuscule way – for supporting the corporation’s policies. If I am a member or employee of the company, I associate myself and my reputation with the ethics of that corporation. If I am a member of the governing board or executive council, I share a direct responsibility for the corporate decisions. In that role I am morally responsible and may be held legally responsible for crimes committed by the corporation.

It should be noted, however, that an employee or even an owner does not invest the whole of his or her personhood in (other) corporations. People invest themselves to varying degrees, according to the nature of the organization and their personal inclinations. One would expect deeper investment in the roles of father, citizen, or church member than in following a business career or belonging to a club. Much depends of whether we have the option of exit from a corporation.²⁰

Responsibility and Time

Responsibility that is always both personal and corporate helps us to understand how the relation of past and present is constituted. A responsibility to everyone and everything includes a responsibility to the past. At least in principle, this responsibility to the past is clear. It means that responsibility includes my listening to the voices of the past for guidance in the present. The hazier issue is whether and how someone is responsible for the past. Can a person today be held responsible for actions committed in the past?

The moral responsibility for my own past goes back as far as my childhood. Can it go back further? Is a Christian born in the twentieth century responsible for the persecution of Jews in fifteenth-century Toledo? Is a German born in 1947 responsible for Nazi atrocities? Is a white citizen in today’s United States responsible for the horrors of slavery? To all of these questions an answer other than no seems grossly unfair. Yet such questions do not go away. In discussions of these issues, someone typically says “of course I don’t believe in collective guilt” and then goes on to attribute a kind of collective guilt spreading back into the past.

“Germany,” “Christian church” or “United States” are not fictions, nor are they (social) collections of individuals. They are corporate realities or artificial persons that are responsible for actions. A member of one of these organizations shares in the corporate act to the degree that he or she decides, praises, approves, accepts, silently rejects, quietly opposes, or publicly protests the actions of the body.

As a member of one of these organizations, a person is morally responsible for protesting against an immoral act in the present. As a member of the organization at a later time in history, he or she is still responsible for protesting – in the form of present actions – something that was clearly immoral in the past. Adult voices in the United States were needed in 1945 to protest the progressively immoral bombings of Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki; at the time, few voices were heard. There is still a need for protest, although it obviously takes a different form more than half a century later.

A United States citizen is not responsible *for* those actions in the past but he or she is responsible *to* those past actions. Responsibility to the past leads to being responsible for present actions. Nothing is gained by having people feel vaguely guilty for crimes that they did not commit. The rest of the world does not expect the United States and its citizens to wallow in guilt for past transgressions. But other countries would like to be assured that the United States is responsible to its past, to the bad memories as well as the good, so as to learn some lessons. Responsible action in the present has to be grounded in such knowledge.

Acceptance of the past in the present is connected to how we view the future. In a strange way, the past (the meaning of our past) depends upon the future (our projection of a future in the present). The common image of time as a series of points creates a false symmetry of past and future. The past exists in a way that the future does not. Our responsibility to the future is fundamentally different from our listening to the voices of the past. One cannot be responsible to voices that do not yet exist. We also cannot be responsible for future actions because those actions have not yet been performed. Nevertheless, we still sense a responsibility that we have in regard to the future, even though the terms individual responsibility and social responsibility leave any connection to the future inexplicable.

Responsibility understood to be both personal and corporate reveals two definite connections to the future: corporations and children. As a member of a corporation that is an artificial person the actions of a natural person can influence the future. One of the main differences between natural and artificial persons is that the former die but the latter can be chartered in perpetuity. My present responsibility is mediated to the future by political, religious, environmental, and business corporations. I am responsible to the future and I am responsible for the future insofar as I act within a corporation that will outlive me.

There is some irony in this fact. In the thinking of liberal theoreticians, progress has usually been measured by the individual's freedom from control by institutions. And yet, our contribution to a better world depends upon the extension of our corporate selves into the corporate structures of large organizations. Peter French writes: "The endurance of corporate persons, a prospect that terrorized the Enlightenment liberals, insures the projection of moral and cultural responsibilities in both temporal directions."²¹

The other link to the future, to a future that has already begun, is children. One can be responsible to and for the future by caring for children. Adults have a responsibility for children to the degree that a child cannot be responsible for its own actions. Parents have a special responsibility for their own children's actions. But the parent has to be careful to slowly relinquish responsibility for a child's action as the child gets older.

The danger of well-meaning adults is that they substitute their decisions for the child's own responsibility. A child is responsible from the moment of birth, if not earlier. Adults have to provide a safe haven during the time that infants and young children try out their responsibility to their environment and their responsibility for what they can do by their own physical and mental

powers. A child's moral responsibility is not something that arrives all at once or even in one year. Modern studies have not significantly changed the traditional view that children can exercise a moral sense by age five or six, but that a developed moral responsibility for one's actions is not present until the teenage years.

The aim of the adult ought to be to continuously increase the young person's own ability to be morally responsible. If a young person commits crimes, the parents have to examine what went wrong. The parents quite possibly share some responsibility for the child's failure. However, recent efforts in the United States to make parents legally responsible for actions by their sixteen- or eighteen-year-old children are unfair.²²

Children, it is often said, are the promise of the future. The statement is true in the most literal sense. For most religious groups, children are God's special representative. In Christian history from Augustine to the Puritans, children were cast as vessels of sin in need of harsh discipline. In modern times, children are more often sentimentalized as the model of human innocence. Neither attitude does justice to children as the embodying of possibility, promise and hope for the future of the human race.²³ In negotiations to end factional wars, no more important question can be asked than: What about the children?

¹ Susan Parker, "Esther Duflo Explains Why She Believes Randomized Controlled Trials Are So Vital," *Center for Effective Philanthropy Blog*, June 23, 2011.

² René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 99-100, 302-04, 365-66; John Cottingham, "A Brute to the Brutes? Descartes Treatment of Animals," *Philosophy*, 53 (1978), 551-59.

³ Vicki Hearne, *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name* (New York: Knopf, 1986)

⁴ Martin Buber, "Education," in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 92: "We practice responsibility for that realm of life allotted and entrusted to us for which we are able to respond, that is, for which we have a relation of deeds which may count – in all our inadequacy – as a proper response."

⁵ Edward Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); G. Stent, *Morality as a Biological Phenomenon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978; for a spirited criticism of this position, see Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 28-75.

⁶ William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 146-147.

⁷ *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, II, 2514.

⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *Philosophy of Existentialism* (New York: Citadel, 1961), 99.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 259; Frank Kermode, *Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 38.

¹⁰ Agnes Heller, "What is and What is not Practical Reason," in *Universalism vs. Communitarianism*, ed. David Rasmussen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 166: "The ominous 'Am I my brother's keeper' is the paragon of the wrong response (for it means the refusal to take responsibility).

¹¹ Ira Byock, *Dying Well* (New York: Riverhead, 1997; Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream: Living with Mortality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

¹² Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 107-08.

¹³ Mary Midgley, *The Ethical Primate* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 82: "We are free – not if we do something unpredictable but – if our act is our own."

¹⁴ Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1923). I, 43.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Wolgast, *Ethics of an Artificial Person* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 9-10

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Vol I: Thinking* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), 5.

¹⁷ P.W. Duff, *Personality in Roman Private Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).

¹⁸ *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310(2010).

¹⁹ James Coleman, *The Asymmetrical Society* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 84.

²⁰ The most imaginative writing in this area has been done by Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

²¹ Peter French, *Responsibility Matters*, 145.

²² On the ambiguity of the term “child” and the consequent confusion about children’s rights, see Michael Freeman, eds. *The Ideologies of Children’s Rights* (Dordrecht: Martin Nijhof, 1992); Lawrence Houlgate, “Children, Paternalism and Rights to Liberty,” in *Having Children*, ed. Onora O’Neil and William Ruddick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

²³ Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper Torch, 1966), 91; Bernard Wisby, *The Child and the Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968).