

# Responsibility

A couple of qualifiers first. When I write of responsibility, I am referring to personal responsibility for acts committed, not corporate responsibility in, for example, the military or business, although most points can be applied in those areas also. Secondly, many of my points may seem obvious. Nevertheless, I feel they need to be made in order to speak to the broader considerations.

It seems that people are either embracing or running from responsibility. We often hear the phrase “I take full responsibility.” Usually from someone who isn’t actually responsible, but is trying to appear noble or even sacrificial. More often than not the proclamation is from someone high enough up the chain of command that the ramifications of the act won’t reach them; so they can safely claim responsibility without fear of the consequences of being responsible. The best of both worlds.

We are also familiar with the person who is trying to avoid taking responsibility. Not really because they want to avoid being responsible, but because they wish to avoid the results of being responsible. They would happily admit responsibility if there were no price to pay.

In both cases individuals are being disingenuous for personal reasons.

In order to be responsible for an event, one must be the cause of the event. If I push a vase off a table, I’m responsible for breaking it because I caused it to fall. If I shove you into the table and the vase falls off, I’m still responsible for breaking the vase even though I wasn’t the one who hit the table. There can be any number of these intervening actions, but only the causal agent is responsible.

When we add intent to our actions we add consequence to our responsibility; we become blameworthy, that is, we incur a claim of guilt upon us. Genuine accidents do not carry blame other than the debt of regret. For example, if I tripped over a rug and bumped the table the vase was standing on, I remain completely responsible for breaking the vase, however, since I had no intent to break the vase the debt is one of conscience not of guilt. To put this idea mathematically, Intent + Action = Consequence. James puts the relationship of intent, action, and consequence this way, Chapter 1 verses 14 and 15: “but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” Desire + Sin = Death.

It is impossible to ‘take responsibility’. One is either responsible or not, one either caused an event or he didn’t. One does not become responsible because one declares that he is. However, one can take the penalty of an action for which one is not responsible. Someone other than the guilty party can pay the debt for the action. This is not taking responsibility, this is transferring the debt from the guilty party to an innocent party willing to take the consequences.