

Preface

Against Moral Responsibility is an assault on the moral responsibility system: a system that is profoundly entrenched in our society and its institutions, deeply rooted in our emotions, and vigorously defended by philosophers from Aristotle to the present day. Such an assault might seem foolhardy, or at best quixotic. But in fact, the results from extensive psychological, sociological, and biological studies have caused major problems for defenders of moral responsibility, and there are serious flaws in the moral responsibility system. Furthermore, the philosophical defenders of moral responsibility—though they are numerous, imaginative, insightful, and committed—are in no position to offer a unified defense of the moral responsibility citadel. Instead, in their reactions to the scientific advances challenging the moral responsibility system, philosophers have proposed a great variety of different and conflicting defenses of moral responsibility. There is such controversy among the defenders of moral responsibility that moral responsibility abolitionists might carry the day by sitting back safely while the defenders demolish one another's arguments.

The basic claim of this book is that—all the extraordinary and creative efforts of contemporary philosophers notwithstanding—moral responsibility cannot survive in our naturalistic-scientific system. Moral responsibility was a comfortable fit among gods and miracles and mysteries, but the deeper scientific understanding of human behavior and the causes shaping human character leaves no room for moral responsibility. The second claim is that when we look carefully at the moral responsibility system and at what would actually remain when that system is abolished, it is clear that what we really want—natural *non*miraculous human free will, moral judgments, warm and meaningful personal relationships, creative abilities, and the opportunity to make our own decisions and exercise effective

control—can survive and flourish without moral responsibility, and that what is lost—“just deserts,” blame and punishment, righteous retribution, special reward—we are better off without. Finally, there is the question of whether it is actually possible to reject the moral responsibility system and replace it with something else. Obviously, that will not be easy on either a personal or societal level, but the final claim of the book is that it is socially and psychologically possible and that we are already making progress toward that goal. In short, the total abolition of moral responsibility is both desirable and possible.

Acknowledgments

In writing this book, I have been remarkably fortunate in the kind and generous support of my family, my friends, and my colleagues, and I have been very lucky to live in an era when so many remarkable philosophers and psychologists are making such insightful contributions to the questions of free will and moral responsibility.

George Graham has marked my path through the psychological literature, often alerting me to important psychological studies that I would otherwise have missed. His work on abnormal psychology and its philosophical implications is a striking example of what can be accomplished by scientifically knowledgeable contemporary philosophers.

My good friend Richard Double, through his published work and our conversations, has long been my guide through the maze of issues surrounding free will and moral responsibility. The remarkable clarity of his views and his ability to map all of the connections and intersections of these tangled questions have been invaluable.

Twenty-five years ago I had an opportunity to write a review of Robert Kane's early book, *Free Will and Values* (1985). Before starting to read the book in preparation for writing the review, I was prepared to scoff: just another in a long line of failed libertarian fantasies, I assumed. Reading only a few pages put a quick end to my scoffing; and though I did not stay to pray, it was soon clear that Bob had developed a libertarian account that was something entirely new: rigorous, never straying anywhere close to miracles or mysteries, carefully argued, scientifically informed. Though we have never been able to reach agreement on the basic issues—Robert Kane remains a resourceful defender of the moral responsibility system that this

book attacks—his work, and a number of very enlightening conversations with him, have deepened my understanding of all the issues surrounding free will and moral responsibility (though obviously not quite to the depth that Bob would like) and have been a major stimulus to my musings on the subject.

In recent visits to Tallahassee, I have had the pleasure of luncheon discussions with Randy Clarke, Al Mele, and Mike McKenna; those lively luncheons not only were a great pleasure, but also gave me a much clearer picture of several key issues (I fear they will conclude that my picture is still quite muddled, but at least it is clearer than it was).

I have developed the strongest attacks I can muster against a great variety of defenders of moral responsibility. But it will be obvious to any philosopher that it is the extraordinary richness, variety, and rigor of the arguments in *favor* of moral responsibility that have been the greatest stimulus to my own work, and I am indebted to all of the philosophers who have made the current debate so lively and interesting.

Recently, I completed my second decade in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Youngstown State University. Youngstown, deep in the heart of the northeast Ohio rust belt, is not a scenic paradise, but if you scratch beneath the surface, it is a beautiful city with beautiful people. My students are from every ethnic background, the children of every wave of immigrants that arrived to work in the now-abandoned steel mills. They do not always have splendid educational backgrounds, but they have a tremendous respect for education and a remarkable capacity for hard work: often taking classes after finishing a midnight factory shift, then getting kids fed and off to school, checking on an aging parent, and still arriving in class eager to learn. For twenty years, they have made my classes stimulating, enjoyable, fresh, and profoundly satisfying. We are also fortunate to have a large and energetic group of superb majors: on a recent Friday afternoon, more than thirty of them converged on a local coffee shop for several hours of reading and discussing John Locke's views on religious tolerance; there would have been more, had they been able to rearrange their demanding job schedules. I am especially indebted to the students in my recent free will seminar, who probed that question with great passion and deep insight.

I am particularly lucky to be working with such stimulating, productive, and congenial colleagues. Every person in the department is

actively engaged in fascinating areas of research, ranging from the nature of ritual to the philosophical and religious poetry of Iqbal to the ethics of robotic warfare. People are eager to discuss ideas, share insights, suggest articles and books, consider arguments (no matter how strange), and read works in progress. My indebtedness to my friends and colleagues—Tom Shipka, Brendan Minogue, Linda “Tess” Tessier, Chris Bache, Victor Wan-Tatah, Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez, Mustansir Mir, Deborah Mower, Mark Vopat, and Alan Tomhave—is greater than I can describe. We are also fortunate to have a wonderful group of people who teach a variety of courses with us, including Julie Aultman, Eric Boynton, Walter Carvin, Sister Nancy Dawson, Martina Haines, Zoreh “Z” Kermani, Jeff Limbian, Sarah Lown, Bernie Oakes, Joseph Schonberger, Donna Sloan, Arnold Smith, and Andrew Stypinski. Jeff Butts, who is a research associate in our Islamic Studies Center, is a very valuable and patient resource for all things technical. The vital center of the department, who adds much to its welcoming warm friendliness and everything to its orderly efficiency, is our remarkable departmental administrator, Mary Dillingham, ably assisted by our talented and congenial student worker, Gina Ponzio.

I have been department chair for the past five years, and frankly, it’s a pretty soft job: Mary and Gina do all the work. But it is made much more pleasant and satisfying by the presence of a supportive and helpful dean, Shearle Furnish; an associate dean, Jane Kestner, who with remarkable patience manages to straighten out all my mistakes; and a provost, Ikram Khawaja, who is a person of complete integrity and strongly supportive of our department.

There are many people around the university and the city and elsewhere who are wonderful friends and very engaging company. Homer Warren is a frequent lunch companion who loves discussing free will and moral responsibility and who brings to those discussions a unique perspective that is invariably insightful. Many others have enriched my understanding and enlarged my curiosity on a tremendous variety of subjects from politics to environmental issues to poker strategies; they include Howard Mettee, Charles Singler, Fred Alexander, Lauren Schroeder, Luke Lucas, Richard White, Chris Raver, Jack Raver, Paul Sracic, Keith Lepak, Stephen Flora, Lia Ruttan, Gary Salvner, Joe Mosca, Tom Henricks, Judy Henricks, Nawal Ammar, and Robert Weaver.

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Thanks to the editors of *American Philosophical Quarterly* and *Social Theory and Practice*, who allowed me to develop some of my arguments in their pages, and for their permission to include that work here.

Special thanks to the friendly folks at the Beat Coffee Shop, next door to campus, for all the warm smiles, wonderful lunches, and magnificent coffee. Without them, my gears would have long since rusted and ground to a stop.

My richest source of joy and support is my family: my wife, Mary, with her great kindness, patience, warmth, and affection, as well as her very helpful expertise in clinical psychology; my sons, Russell and Adam, who are wonderful math and music students, respectively, and who are the greatest source of pure joy and pride in my life; and my delightful and brilliant daughter-in-law, Robyn, who is deeply engaged in her own very promising philosophical studies.

I am grateful to all of the wonderful people who have made it possible to complete this book and helped me avoid many mistakes, though they deserve neither praise nor reward for their generous efforts. The many flaws that remain in the book are the result of my arrogance and obstinacy, for which I sincerely apologize, and for which I deserve no blame.