Taking One's Place in a Moral Universe

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Responsibility as our ability to take appropriate and effective moral actions is a topic that I have been preoccupied with in my own personal and professional life, and so I am very grateful to have this opportunity to engage in a public dialogue with Barbara Houston on her insightful analysis of responsibility. Thank you most kindly.

Houston's central concern in her essay is that we regularly experience resistance and paralysis when it comes to taking moral responsibility. Her diagnosis of our trouble is that we are stuck in only one conceptual gear with respect to responsibility taking, notably the reverse gear that calls for a backward looking perspective. In reverse gear, the move we are best at is moral accounting: sorting out the causation of who is responsible for what and to whom, but this being a normative moral discourse, causation naturally leads to accusation, to blaming. We then get swallowed up in the cycle of guilt and regret, and ego-defensive resistance and denial. Thus, moralizing gives rise to demoralization, and our moral agency is compromised, is paralyzed.

Naturally, we cannot go forward in reverse gear. Reverse gear is designed for backing out of places, especially tight pinches. For going forward and going to places, we need our first, second, and third gear, plus the fourth for the highway. Skillful shifting of moral gears is indeed essential for moral locomotion. So, I am all for taking moral motoring lessons from Houston.

But besides the skill of gear shifting, it seems another essential skill of moral motoring is navigation. For that we have to know the lay of the land. Without such knowledge, we may end up repeatedly driving ourselves onto wrong roads and dead ends from which we have to back out again and again, using the reverse gear. This knowledge involves knowing one's moral universe, and what would help to acquire this knowledge is the possession of a decent map, one that shows, true to reality, what is where and where is what, even if only symbolically on the map. If one does not have a cogent or coherent sense about the lay of the land, one is likely to end up getting lost or stuck. I shall suggest that one such incoherent sense that plagues us in late modernity is the view of ourselves as atomistic individuals held together by extrinsic relationships and linear causality. I would like to probe this view a bit in this limited space in hopes that perhaps it will yield an additional insight into our moral lethargy that Houston is rightly concerned about and has put into perspective for us.

Atomistic individualism pictures individuals as social atoms. We are social atoms to the extent that we view ourselves as singular, self-bound, self-centered, substantive entities. As such, relationships are additional and adventitious, therefore extrinsic, to who we are as selves. We thus externalize other beings and the relationships we "have" with them. In this way, self-identity precedes relationships.

Relationships arise as a result of pre-given selves interacting with each other, not the other way around.

But we have reasons to refute and refuse this atomistic account of who we are. Look at the nature and function of feelings and emotions. They penetrate the seemingly impermeable boundary of the self and bring about, even if only temporarily, a profound transformation in the matrix of the self. Sympathy, kindness, love, and compassion: these and other moral sentiments flow through the permeable boundaries of individuality, rendering our relationship to each other intrinsic. (Of course, these are morally beneficial emotions. Morally harmful emotions, such as hatred, greed, and jealousy, also work the same way but with the opposite result.) Intrinsic relationship means that the self does not precede the relationship, does not lie outside the relationship. Its formation is coextensive with the relationship. Hence, the self is co-emergent with the other in the relationship. The self, the other, and their relationship all arise together, making it impossible to separate categorically and linearly which is which and which comes first. This is what is meant by mutual causality, or mutuality for short.

By mutuality, we should mean more than reciprocity whereby A and B, while maintaining their self-same identity, exchange something extraneous to themselves. Mutuality means that A and B co-arise so that it is impossible to tell with any certainty where the boundaries of A and B begin and end. As with the description of subatomic particles, it becomes difficult to tell even just where A and B are in moral space. They do not have a distinct and separate existence and identity. In quantum mechanical vocabulary, entities exist probabilistically, in *potentia*, spread out as quantum waves which "collapse" into observable "entities" only under observation. It is the exercise of our moral perception that manifests other beings as particular local phenomena under this or that description.

With mutual causality, it is impossible to give the usual kind of moral accounting associated with responsibility. If I co-arise with everyone else in my moral universe, it is difficult to say just exactly how far my responsibility extends in the same way we would have difficulty demarcating just where the sense of one's self lies. For many of us—hopefully for most of us—the demarcation does not coincide with one's epidermis. This difficulty, however, is no indication that we have to abandon the notion of responsibility, let alone abandon taking responsibility. Rather, we have to have a different understanding and feel for responsibility: vast, non-linear, complex, profound, and ultimately non-accountable. Our responsibility is vast because we are related to others not in an immediate and linear way but in the ways of quantum and complexity modalities: that is, non-linear, non-local, ambiguous, unfathomable. One just does not know how exactly one's action will affect the world, but it is safer to assume that it will affect it in far greater and surprising ways than how it usually appears immediately and on the surface. As teachers, many of us have encountered former students who tell us how significantly they were affected by something or another we happened to have said and done on the spur of the moment, which was promptly forgotten. It is the experiences like this which make us pause and wonder how vast the reaches of our actions can be. And

recognizing this, we begin to take our responsibility seriously and resolve to act *as if* what we say and do each moment just might make a far-reaching difference to the world. We should act subjunctively. That is, we should act as if the whole world mattered. Thus, we become full of care in our action. We become extra careful in words and deeds.

Houston's central concern in her essay has been with moral resistance and paralysis which unfortunately tend to be, as she describes it, the emotional fall-out of a backward looking perspective primarily interested in responsibility as attribution of blame. In order to counterbalance this, she has suggested a forward looking perspective that is primarily concerned with moral agents taking on responsibility. I believe that the notion of responsibility under mutual causality that I began to sketch out above would support Houston's effort here. The support comes in two ways. Firstly, the mutual causality view softens the claims of the backward perspective because, under this view, it complicates the attribution of responsibility and blame (and for that matter, praise) so much so that such an exercise is not at all straightforward, let alone "objective." At best, such an exercise is dependent upon an interpretive framework which will be shown to be culturally and metaphysically influenced. To further complicate and compromise the attribution, we can argue that whether someone should be held responsible or not has, in the final analysis, to do with individuals' present capacity for moral agency. Simply put, "ought" implies "can," and by far the best demonstration of "can" is seeing whether a person did it or not! Given this reasoning, if defensible, the best purpose of blaming is to motivate the person to do better in the future. Blaming becomes more like protesting, and further, inspiring and encouraging. "You ought to have done X" means that "You could have done X, had you had a better presence of mind-heart…had you tried harder." This is what the intent of the forward looking perspective is about. Thus, from starting out with the backward looking perspective, we have moved into the forward looking perspective.

The second way of support is more directly in line with the forward looking perspective. I would like to argue now that under mutual causality, our self-understanding of who we are will be such that we will more naturally look forward to taking responsibility. Denial, resistance, fear, blame, resentment, and guilt are symptoms that we find when what we have to take up is too burdensome. But how burdensome our responsibility is, is not so much a function of the weight of the burden as the person's weight-bearing capacity, such as her muscular strength. Thus weight lifters take up weight lifting to strengthen and train their muscles so that they can lift, more easily, progressively larger weights. I would like to make an additional observation that the view of mutual causality functions not only to enlarge our capacity to bear the burden of responsibility but to shift our understanding of responsibility in such a way that we find taking up responsibility less onerous and self-conscious, but natural and appropriate. How is this?

The ontological view that goes with linear causality is, as I indicated, atomistic individualism. In this view, individuals see themselves as singular agents who alone are responsible for what they do. This way of viewing, if adopted seriously, is

enough to paralyze anyone. Picture a person who is playing the piano, and then suddenly stops to ask how he is managing to move all his fingers so expertly as to produce this incredible string of sound. Right there and then he will stumble and his virtuoso playing will come to an abrupt end. If he is crazy enough to think that he alone is responsible for moving his fingers, he will suddenly be overcome by an unbearable sense of the enormity of the task he is facing. If he were given to philosophical pondering, he would wonder just how his free will was exercised to make his fingers move. And what about the existence of free will? Where is that located? And so on. The view of mutual causality rejects this way of thinking. To begin with, in this view, strictly speaking, there is no such entity as the discrete, atomistic, autonomous individual with a self-contained and self-generated free will. Each individual is co-emergent with everything else in the universe, which makes him or her not singular and independent but composite and interdependent. When a person with this view of mutual causality uses the designator "I," she does not imply the conventional meaning of the singular, autonomous person. If she were a Confucian, for instance, she would imply something like, "all my ancestors, teachers, parents, and siblings." If she were a Daoist, she may imply, "the Dao permeating the myriad of things, including this one (pointing at herself) here." If she were a Buddhist, what she would have in mind would be: "all sentient beings and I." Personally, I do not know what Christians or folks of other faiths, cultural affiliations, or metaphysical bents might say. However, I would say the more inclusive our company is, the greater the sense of totality we could entertain.

At any rate, the point I wish to make is that when we think the self is alone and just one among many, and that all of our doing is the result of this singular self willing and taking of responsibility, the sense of burden is so great as to intimidate and repel the person. No wonder, then, people try to avoid taking responsibility as much as possible. Responsibility becomes a burden, a liability, a cost to the self. It takes a sacrifice to the self, a dent in one's self-interest to take up responsibility. We become self-protective and calculative. And we think that is just perfectly normal and natural. Not so if we have a different view of reality, of our moral universe, and who we are within it. A person of mutual causality does not think that he is a singular individual facing reality that makes unreasonable claims on him, his liberty and his self-interest. He pictures himself inherently as part of the larger whole, and in facing whatever task, he has the sense of bringing the whole along with him to bear upon the task. His responsibility is not so much discharging a duty or paying for one's existence but fulfilling his potential in being a particular part of the whole. He would thus speak of fulfillment when talking about responsibility. What he is doing is not so much *taking* on responsibility as *fulfilling* the potential of the being inscribed in the position he currently occupies in his moral universe.

In conclusion, what I have attempted in this response piece is to draw a different map of the moral universe than the more conventional one of today, namely atomistic individualism, and to show that if we used this map, we might approach taking moral responsibility with a lighter sense of burden. Who knows! We might look forward to our responsibilities.